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THE

PERPETUAL CURATE

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Chronicles of Carlingford

THE

PERPETUAL CURATE

BY THE

AUTHOR OF 'SALEM CHAPEL,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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Chronicles of Carlingford.

THE PERPETUAL CURATE.

CHAPTER XX.

MR WENTWORTH got back to Carlingford by a happy concurrence of trains before the town had gone to sleep. It was summer, when the days are at the longest, and the twilight was just falling into night as he took his way through George Street. He went along the familiar street with a certain terror of looking into people's faces whom he met, and of asking questions, such as was natural to a man who did not know whether something of public note might not have happened in his absence to call attention to his name. He imagined, indeed, that he did see a strange expression in the looks of

the townsfolk he encountered on his way. He thought they looked at him askance as they made their salutations, and said something to each other after they passed, which, indeed, in several cases was true enough, though the cause was totally different from any suspected by Mr Wentworth. Anxious to know, and yet unwilling to ask, it was with a certain relief that the Curate saw the light gleaming out from the open door of Elsworthy's shop as he approached. He went in and tossed down his travelling-bag on the counter, and threw himself on the solitary chair which stood outside for the accommodation of customers, with a suppressed excitement, which made his question sound abrupt and significant to the ears of Elsworthy. "Has anything happened since I went away?" said Mr Wentworth, throwing a glance round the shop, which alarmed his faithful retainer. Somehow, though nothing was farther from his mind than little Rosa, or any thought of her, the Curate missed the pretty little figure at the first glance.

"Well—no, sir; not much as I've heard of," said Elsworthy, with a little confusion. He was tying up his newspapers as usual, but it did not require the touch of suspicion and

anxiety which gave sharpness to the Curate's quick eyes to make it apparent that the cord was trembling in Mr Elsworthy's hand. "I hope you've had a pleasant journey, sir, and a comfortable visit—it's been but short—but we always miss you in Carlingford, Mr Wentworth, if it was only for a day."

"I'll take my paper," said the young man, who was not satisfied—"so there's no news, isn't there?—all well, and everything going on as usual?" And the look which the suspicious Curate bent upon Mr Elsworthy made that virtuous individual, as he himself described it, "shake in his shoes."

"Much as usual, sir," said the frightened clerk,—"nothing new as I hear of but gossip, and that ain't a thing to interest a clergyman. There's always one report or another flying about, but them follies ain't for your hearing. Nothing more," continued Mr Elsworthy, conscious of guilt, and presenting a very tremulous countenance to the inspection of his suspicious auditor, "not if it was my last word—nothing but gossip, as you wouldn't care to hear."

"I might possibly care to hear if it concerned myself," said the Curate, "or anybody I am interested in," he added, after a little pause, with

rather a forced smile—which convinced Mr Elsworthy that his clergyman had heard all about Rosa, and that the days of his own incumbency as clerk of St Roque's were numbered.

“ Well, sir, if you did hear, it ain’t no blame of mine,” said the injured bookseller; “such a notion would never have come into my mind—no man, I make bold to say, is more particular about keeping to his own rank of life nor me. What you did, sir, you did out of the kindness of your heart, and I’d sooner sell up and go off to the end of the world than impose upon a gentleman. Her aunt’s took her away,” continued Mr Elsworthy, lowering his voice, and cautiously pointing to the back of the shop—“ She’ll not bother you no more.”

“ She?—who?” cried the Perpetual Curate, in sudden consternation. He was utterly bewildered by the introduction of a female actor into the little drama, and immediately ran over in his mind all the women he could think of who could, by any possibility, be involved in mysterious relations with his brother Jack.

“ She’s but a child,” said Elsworthy, pathetically; “she don’t know nothing about the ways o’ this world. If she was a bit proud o’ being noticed, there wasn’t no harm in that.

But seeing as there's nothing in this world that folks won't make a talk of when they've started, her aunt, as is very partic'lar, has took her away. Not as I'm meaning no reproach to you, Mr Wentworth ; but she's a loss to us, is Rosa. She was a cheerful little thing, say the worst of her," said Mr Elsworthy ; "going a-singing and a-chirrupping out and in the shop ; and I won't deny as the place looks desolate, now she's away. But that ain't neither here nor there. It was for her good, as my missis says. Most things as is unpleasant *is* sent for good, they tell me ; and I wouldn't—not for any comfort to myself—have a talk got up about the clergyman——"

By this time Mr Wentworth had awakened to a sense of the real meaning of Elsworthy's talk. He sat upright on his chair, and looked into the face of the worthy shopkeeper until the poor man trembled. "A talk about the clergyman?" said the Curate. "About me, do you mean ? and what has little Rosa to do with me ? Have you gone crazy in Carlingford?—what is the meaning of it all?" He sat with his elbows on the counter, looking at his trembling adherent—looking through and through him, as Elsworthy said. "I should be glad of an explanation ; what does it mean?" said Mr Wentworth, with

a look which there was no evading; and the clerk of St Roque's cast an anxious glance round him for help. He would have accepted it from any quarter at that overwhelming moment; but there was not even an errand-boy to divert from him the Curate's terrible eyes.

"I—I don't know—I—can't tell how it got up," said the unhappy man, who had not even his "missis" in the parlour as a moral support. "One thing as I know is, it wasn't no blame o' mine. I as good as went down on my knees to them three respected ladies when they come to inquire. I said as it was kindness in you a-seeing of the child home, and didn't mean nothing more. I ask you, sir, what could I do?" cried Mr Elsworthy. "Folks in Carlingford will talk o' two straws if they're a-seen a-blowing up Grange Lane on the same breath o' wind. I couldn't do no more nor contradict it," cried Rosa's guardian, getting excited in his self-defence; "and to save your feelings, Mr Wentworth, and put it out o' folks's power to talk, the missis has been and took her away."

"To save my feelings!" said the Curate, with a laugh of contempt and vexation and impatience which it was not pleasant to hear. At another moment an accusation so ridiculous

would have troubled him very little; but just now, with a sudden gleam of insight, he saw all the complications which might spring out of it to confuse further the path which he already felt to be so burdened. "I'll tell you what, Elsworthy," said Mr Wentworth; "if you don't want to make me your enemy instead of your friend, you'll send for this child instantly, without a day's delay. Tell your wife that my orders are that she should come back directly. *My* feelings! do the people in Carlingford think me an idiot, I wonder?" said the Curate, walking up and down to relieve his mind.

"I don't know, sir, I'm sure," said Elsworthy, who thought some answer was required of him. To tell the truth, Rosa's uncle felt a little spiteful. He did not see matters in exactly the same light as Mr Wentworth did. At the bottom of his heart, after all, lay a thrill of awakened ambition. Kings and princes had been known to marry far out of their degree for the sake of a beautiful face; and why a Perpetual Curate should be so much more lofty in his sentiments, puzzled and irritated the clerk of St Roque's. "There ain't a worm but will turn when he's trod upon," said Mr Elsworthy to himself; and when his temper was roused, he became im-

pertinent, according to the manner of his kind.

Mr Wentworth gave him a quick look, struck by the changed tone, but unable to make out whether it might not be stupidity. "You understand what I mean, Elsworthy," he said, with his loftiest air. "If Rosa does not return instantly, I shall be seriously offended. How you and your friends could be such utter idiots as to get up this ridiculous fiction, I can't conceive; but the sooner it's over the better. I expect to see her back to-morrow," said the Curate, taking up his bag and looking with an absolute despotism, which exasperated the man, in Elsworthy's face.

"You may be sure, sir, if she knows as you want to see her, she'll come," said the worm which had been trampled on; "and them as asks me why, am I to say it was the clergyman's orders?" said Elsworthy, looking up in his turn with a consciousness of power. "That means a deal, does that. I wouldn't take it upon me to say as much, not of myself; but if them's your orders, Mr Wentworth——"

"It appears to me, Elsworthy," said the Curate, who was inwardly in a towering passion, though outwardly calm enough, "either that you've been

drinking, or that you mean to be impertinent—
which is it ?”

“ Me !—drinking, sir ?” cried the shopkeeper. “ If I had been one as was given that way, I wouldn’t have attended to your interests not as I have done. There ain’t another man in Carlingford as has stood up for his clergyman as I have ; and as for little Rosa, sir, most folks as had right notions would have inquired into that; but being as I trusted in you, I wasn’t the one to make any talk. I’ve said to everybody as has asked me that there wasn’t nothing in it but kindness. I don’t say as I hadn’t my own thoughts—for gentlemen don’t go walking up Grange Lane with a pretty little creature like that all for nothing ; but instead o’ making anything of that, or leading of you on, or putting it in the child’s head to give you encouragement, what was it I did but send her away afore you came home, that you mightn’t be led into temptation ! And instead of feelin’ grateful, you say I’ve been drinking ! It’s a thing as I scorn to answer,” said Mr Elsworthy ; “ there ain’t no need to make any reply—all Carlingford knows *me*; but as for Rosa, if it is understood plain between us that it’s your wish, I ain’t the man to interfere,” continued Rosa’s guardian, with a

smile which drove the Curate frantic ; “but she hasn’t got no father, poor thing, and it’s my business to look after her ; and I’ll not bring her back, Mr Wentworth, unless it’s understood between us plain.”

Strong language, forcible but unclerical, was on the Curate’s lips, and it was only with an effort that he restrained himself. “Look here, Elsworthy,” he said ; “it will be better for you not to exasperate me. You understand perfectly what I mean. I repeat, Rosa must come back, and that instantly. It is quite unnecessary to explain to you why I insist upon this, for you comprehend it. Pshaw ! don’t let us have any more of this absurdity,” he exclaimed, impatiently. “No more, I tell you. Your wife is not such a fool. Let anybody who inquires about me understand that I have come back, and am quite able to account for all my actions,” said the Curate, shouldering his bag. He was just about leaving the shop when Elsworthy rushed after him in an access of alarm and repentance.

“One moment, sir,” cried the shopkeeper ; “there ain’t no offence, Mr Wentworth ? I am sure there ain’t nobody in Carlingford as means better, or would do as much for his clergyman.

One moment, sir ; there was one thing as I forgot to mention. Mr Wodehouse, sir, has been took bad. There was a message up a couple of hours ago to know when you was expected home. He's had a stroke, and they don't think as he'll get over it—being a man of a full 'abit of body," said Mr Elsworthy in haste, lest the Curate should break in on his unfinished speech, " makes it dangerous. I've had my fears this long time past."

"A stroke," said the Curate—"a fit, do you mean ? When, and how ? and, good heavens ! to think that you have been wasting my time with rubbish, and knew this !" Mr Wentworth tossed down his travelling-bag again, and wiped his forehead nervously. He had forgotten his real anxiety in the irritation of the moment. Now it returned upon him with double force. " How did it come on ?" he asked, " and when ?" and stood waiting for the answer with a world of other questions, which he could not put to Elsworthy, hanging on his lips.

" I have a deal of respect for that family, sir," said Elsworthy ; " they have had troubles as few folks in Carlingford know of. How close they have kep' things, to be sure !—but not so close as them that has good memories, and can

put two and two together, couldn't call to mind. My opinion, sir, if you believe me," said the clerk of St Roque's, approaching close to the Curate's ear, "is, that it's something concerning the son."

"The son!" said Mr Wentworth, with a troubled look. Then, after a pause, he added quickly, as if his exclamation had been an oversight, "What son? has Mr Wodehouse a son?"

"To think as they should have been so close with the clergyman!" said Elsworthy, innocently; "though he ain't no credit that they should talk of him. He's been gone out o' Carlingford nigh upon twenty year; but he ain't dead for all that; and I'm told as he's been seen about Grange Lane this last spring. I am one as hears all the talk that's a-going on, being, as you might say, in a public position of life. Such a thing mightn't maybe come to your ears, sir?" he continued, looking inquisitively in Mr Wentworth's face; "but wherever he is, you may be sure it's something about him as has brought on this attack on the old man. It was last night as he was took so bad, and a couple of hours ago a message came up. Miss Wodehouse (as is the nicest lady in Grange

Lane, and a great friend to me) had took a panic, and she was a-crying for you, the man said, and wouldn't take no denial. If I had known where you was to be found, I'd have sent word."

"Send down my bag to my house," said the Curate, hastily interrupting him. "Good-night —don't forget what I said about the other matter." Mr Wentworth went out of the shop with a disagreeable impression that Elsworthy had been examining his face like an inquisitor, and was already forming conclusions from what he had seen there. He went away hurriedly, with a great many vague fears in his mind. Mr Wodehouse's sudden illness seemed to him a kind of repetition and echo of the Squire's, and in the troubled and uncertain state of his thoughts, he got to confusing them together in the centre of this whirl of unknown disaster and perplexity. Perhaps even thus it was not all bitterness to the young man to feel his family united with that of Lucy Wodehouse. He went down Grange Lane in the summer darkness under the faint stars, full of anxiety and alarm, yet not without a thrill in his heart, a sweeter under-current of conscious agitation in the knowledge that he was hastening to her

presence. Sudden breaks in his thoughts revealed her, as if behind a curtain, rising to receive him, giving him her hand, meeting his look with a smile; so that, on the whole, neither Gerald's distress, nor Jack's alarming call, nor his father's attack, nor Mr Wodehouse's illness, nor the general atmosphere of vexation and trouble surrounding his way, could succeed in making the young man totally wretched. He had this little stronghold of his own to retire into. The world could not fall to pieces so long as he continued with eager steps to devour the road which led to Mr Wodehouse's garden-door.

Before he had reached that goal, however, he met a group who were evidently returning from some little dinner in Grange Lane. Mr Wentworth took off his hat hastily in recognition of Mrs Morgan, who was walking by her husband's side, with a bright-coloured hood over her head instead of a bonnet. The Curate, who was a man of taste, could not help observing, even in the darkness, and amid all his preoccupations, how utterly the cherry-coloured trimmings of her head-dress were out of accordance with the serious countenance of the Rector's wife, who

was a little heated with her walk. She was a good woman, but she was not fair to look upon; and it occurred to Mr Wentworth to wonder if Lucy were to wait ten years for him, would the youthful grace dry and wither out of her like this! And then all at once another idea flashed upon his mind, without any wish of his. Like the unhappy lover in the ballad, he was suddenly aware of a temptation—

“ How there looked him in the face
An angel beautiful and bright,
And how he knew it was a fiend.”

“ Of course the Rectory will go to Frank.” He could not tell why at that moment the words rang into his ear with such a penetrating sound. That he hated himself for being able to think of such a possibility made no difference. It came darting and tingling into his mind like one of those suggestions of blasphemy which the devils whispered in Christian’s ear as he went through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. He went on faster than ever to escape from it, scarcely observing that Mrs Morgan, instead of simply acknowledging his bow as she passed, stopped to shake hands and to say how glad she was he had come back again. He

thought of it afterwards with wonder and a strange gratitude. The Rector's wife was not like the conventional type of a pitying angel ; and even had she been so, he had not time to recognise her at that moment as he went struggling with his demons to Mr Wodehouse's green door.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHEN the green door was opened, Mr Wentworth saw at a glance that there was agitation and trouble in the house. Lights were twinkling irregularly in the windows here and there, but the family apartment, the cheerful drawing-room, which generally threw its steady, cheerful blaze over the dark garden, shone but faintly with half-extinguished lights and undrawn curtains. It was evident at a glance that the room was deserted, and its usual occupants engaged elsewhere. "Master's very bad, sir," said the servant who opened the door; "the young ladies is both with him, and a hired nurse come in besides. The doctor don't seem to have no great hopes, but it will be a comfort to know as you have come back. Miss Wodehouse wanted you very bad an hour or two ago, for they thought as master was reviving, and could

understand. I'll go and let them know you are here."

"Don't disturb them, unless I can be of use," said Mr Wentworth. The look of the house, and the atmosphere of distress and anxiety about it, chilled him suddenly. His visions and hopes seemed guilty and selfish as he went slowly up those familiar steps and into the house, over which the shadow of death seemed already lying. He went by himself into the forsaken drawing - room, where two neglected candles were burning feebly in a corner, and the wistful sky looking in as if to ask why the domestic temple was thus left open and uncared for. After the first moment he went hastily to the windows, and drew down the blinds in a kind of tender impatience. He could not bear that anything in the world, even her father's danger, should discompose the sweet, good order of the place where Lucy's image dwelt. There was her chair and her basket of work, and on the little table a book marked with pencil-marks, such as youthful readers love to make ; and by degrees that breath of Lucy lingering in the silent room overcame its dreariness, and the painful sense of desertion which had struck him at first. He hovered about that corner where

her usual place was, feeling in his heart that Lucy in trouble was dearer, if possible, than Lucy in happiness, and hung over her chair, with a mixture of reverence and tenderness and yearning, which could never be expressed in words. It was the divinest phase of love which was in his mind at the moment ; for he was not thinking of himself, but of her, and of how he could succour and comfort her, and interpose his own true heart and life between her and all trouble. It was at this moment that Lucy herself entered the room ; she came in softly, and surprised him in the overflowing of his heart. She held out her hand to him as usual, and smiled, perhaps less brightly, but that of course arose from the circumstances of the house ; and her voice was very measured and steady when she spoke, less variable than of old. What was it she said ? Mr Wentworth unconsciously left the neighbourhood of that chair over which he had been bending, which, to tell the truth, he had leaned his head upon, loverlike, and perhaps even kissed for her sake, five minutes before, and grew red and grew pale with a strange revulsion and tumult of feeling. He could not tell what the difference was, or what it meant. He only felt in an instant, with a sense of the

change that chilled him to the heart, as if somehow a wall of ice had risen between them. He could see her through that transparent veil, and hear her speak, and perceive the smile which cast no warmth of reflection on him ; but in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, everything in heaven and earth was changed. Lucy herself, to her own consciousness, trembled and faltered, and felt as if her voice and her looks must betray an amount of emotion which she would have died rather than show ; but then Lucy had rehearsed this scene before, and knew all she intended by it ; whereas upon the Curate, in his little flush and overflow of tenderness, it fell like a sudden earthquake, rending his fair edifice of happiness asunder, and casting him out into unexpected darkness. Sudden confusion, mortification, even a sense of injury and bitterness, came swelling over his heart as he set a chair for her as far away as possible from the corner in which he had been indulging such vain and unwarrantable dreams.

“It happened yesterday,” said Lucy ; “we have not been quite able to make out what was the cause ; at least I have not been able to find it out. The clerks at the office say it was something about—but that does not matter,” she

went on, with her sweet politeness : “you don’t care for the details. I sometimes fancy Mary knows more than she tells me, and I think you are in her confidence, Mr Wentworth. But I am not going to ask you any questions. The doctors say he is not suffering so much as he seems to be. It is terrible to see him lie there not knowing any of us,” said Lucy, with a tremble in her voice.

“But you thought him better some time ago ?” said the Curate, whose words choked him, and who could not endure to speak.

“Yes, about six o’clock,” said Lucy, “he tried to speak, and put Mary in a great fright, I cannot tell why. Would you be good enough, Mr Wentworth,” she went on hastily, with a strange mixture of earnestness and coldness, “if you know of anything she is keeping secret, to bid her tell me ? I am able to bear anything there may be to bear—surely as well as she is, who has had no trouble,” said Lucy, softly ; and for a moment she wavered in her fixed composure, and the wall of ice moved as if it might fall.

“Nor you ?” said the Curate, bending anxiously forward to look into her eyes. He was inexpressibly moved and agitated by the inference, which perhaps no listener less intensely

concerned would have drawn from what Lucy said. He could not bear that she should have any trouble which he might not do something to relieve her of.

"Oh, no, nor I," said Lucy, quickly, and in that moment the softening of tone disappeared entirely. "Mary will be pleased to see you, Mr Wentworth. I will go and relieve her presently. Papa is asleep just now, and I was down-stairs giving some directions when you came in. I wanted to ask you to look after that poor woman at No. 10. She still keeps living on, and I have not been able to see her to-day. She misses me when I don't go," said Lucy, with a very little unconscious sigh. "Would you see her, please, to-morrow, if you have time?"

"Yes, certainly," said the Curate; and then there was a pause. "Is there nothing but this that you will let me do for you?" he asked, trusting to his looks to show the heart, which at this moment he was so much tempted to disclose to her, but dared not. And even in all her trouble Lucy was too much of a woman to neglect an opportunity so tempting.

"Thank you," she said. "Yes, there are those poor little Bertrams I was to have seen

to-day—if you would be so very good as to send some one to them.” Lucy lifted her eyes only as she ended this little speech. She had meant it cruelly, to be sure, and the arrow had gone home; but when she met the look that was fixed on her after her little shaft was fired, Lucy’s resolution faltered. The tears came rushing to her eyes so hot and rapid that she could not restrain them. Some trouble of her own gave poignancy to that outbreak of filial grief. “Papa is so very ill!” she said, with a sob, as a scalding drop fell upon her hand; and then got up suddenly, afraid of the consequences. But the Curate, mortified, wounded, and disheartened as he was, had no comprehension either of the bitterness or the relenting that was in Lucy’s thoughts. Rosa Elsworthy did not so much as occur to him in all his confused wonderings. He went after her to the door, too much perplexed and distressed to be indignant, as his first impulse was. She turned half round, with a tremulous little inclination of her head, which was all the good-night she could venture on. But the young man was too much disturbed to permit this.

“You will give me your hand, surely,” he said, taking it, and holding it fast—a hand so

different from that weak woman's hand that clung to Gerald without any force to hold him, in Wentworth Rectory. Those reluctant fingers, so firm and so soft, which scorned any struggle to withdraw themselves, but remained passive in his with a more effectual protest still against his grasp, wrung the very heart of the Perpetual Curate. He let them go with a sigh of vexation and disappointment. "Since that is all I can do, I will do it," he said—"that or anything else." She had left him almost before the words were said ; and it was in a very disconsolate mood that he turned back into the deserted drawing-room. To tell the truth, he forgot everything else for the moment, asking himself what it could mean ; and walked about stumbling over the chairs, feeling all his little edifice of personal consolation falling to the winds, and not caring much though everything else should follow. He was in this state of mind when Miss Wodehouse came to him, moving with noiseless steps, as everybody did in the stricken house.

"Oh, Mr Wentworth, I am so glad you have come," said that mild woman, holding out both her hands to him. She was too much agitated to say anything more. She was not equal to

the emergency, or any emergency, but sank down on a chair, and relieved herself by tears, while the Curate stood anxiously by, waiting for what she had to say to him. "My father is very ill," she said, like Lucy, through her crying; "I don't know what good anybody can do; but thank God you've come home—now I shall feel I have somebody to apply to, whatever happens," said poor Miss Wodehouse, drying the eyes that were suffused again the next moment. Her helpless distress did not overwhelm the spectator, like Lucy's restrained trouble, but that was natural enough.

"Tell me about it," said Mr Wentworth; "the cause—can I guess at the cause? it is something about your——"

"Oh hush! don't say his name," cried Miss Wodehouse. "Yes, yes, what else could it be? Oh, Mr Wentworth, will you close the door, please, and see that there's no one about. I dare not speak to you till I am sure there's no one listening; not that I suspect anybody of listening," said the distressed woman; "but one never knows. I am afraid it is all my fault," she continued, getting up again suddenly to see that the windows were closed. "I ought to have sent him away, instead of putting my

trouble upon you ; and now he is in greater danger than ever. Oh, Mr Wentworth, I meant it for the best ; and now, unless you can help us, I don't know what I am to do."

"I cannot help you unless you tell me what is wrong," said the Curate, making her sit down, and drawing a chair close to her. He took her hand, by way of compelling her attention — a fair, soft hand too, in its restless, anxious way. He held it in a brotherly grasp, trying to restore her to coherence, and induce her to speak.

"I don't know enough about business to tell you," she said. "He was in danger when I threw him upon your charity; and oh, Mr. Wentworth, thank you, thank you a thousand times, for taking him in like a brother. If Lucy only knew! But I don't feel as if I dared to tell her—and yet I sometimes think I ought, for your—I mean for all our sakes. Yes, I will try to explain it if I can ; but I can't—indeed I don't understand," cried the poor lady in despair. "It is something about a bill—it was something about a bill before ; and I thought I could soften papa, and persuade him to be merciful ; but it has all turned to greater wretchedness and misery. The first one was

paid, you know, and I thought papa might relent ;—but—don't cast us off, Mr Wentworth —don't go and denounce him ; you might, but you will not. It would be justice, I acknowledge," cried the weeping woman ; "but there is something higher than justice even in this world. You are younger than I am, and so is Lucy ; but you are better than me, you young people, and you must be more merciful too. I have seen you going among the poor people and among the sick, and I could not have done it ; and you won't forsake me—oh, Mr Wentworth, you won't forsake me, when you know that my trouble is greater than I can bear !"

"I will not forsake you," said the Curate ; "but tell me what it is. I have been summoned to Carlingford by my brother, and I am bewildered and disturbed beyond what I can tell you——"

"By your brother ?" said Miss Wodehouse, with her unfailing instinct of interest in other people. "I hope there is no trouble in your own family, Mr Wentworth. One gets so selfish when one is in great distress. I hope he is not ill. It sounds as if there was comfort in the very name of a brother," said the gentle woman, drying her tears, "and I hope it is so

with you ; but it isn't always so. I hope you will find he is better when you get home. I am very, very sorry to hear that you are in trouble too."

Mr Wentworth got up from his chair with a sigh of impatience. "Will nobody tell me what is the matter ?" he said. "Mr Wodehouse is ill, and there is some mysterious cause for it ; and you are miserable, and there is a cause for that too ; and I am to do something to set things right without knowing what is wrong. Will you not tell me ? What is it ? Has your——"

"Oh, Mr Wentworth, don't say anybody's name—don't speak so loud. There may be a servant in the staircase or something," cried Miss Wodehouse. "I hear somebody coming now." She got up to listen, her face growing white with panic, and went a few steps towards the door, and then tottered into another chair, unable to command herself. A certain sick thrill of apprehension came over the Curate, too, as he hastened forward. He could not tell what he was afraid of, or whether it was only the accumulated agitation of the day that made him weak. Somebody was coming up the stairs, and towards this room, with a footstep more careless than those stealthy steps with which all the servants were stealing about the

house. Whoever he was, he stopped at the door a moment, and then looked cautiously in. When he saw the figure of the Curate in the imperfect light, he withdrew his head again as if deliberating with himself, and then, with a sudden rush, came in, and shut the door after him. "Confound these servants, they're always prowling about the house," said the new-comer. He was an alarming apparition in his great beard and his shabbiness, and the fugitive look he had. "I couldn't help it," he broke forth, with a spontaneous burst of apology and self-defence. "I heard he was ill, and I couldn't keep quiet. How is he? You don't mean to say *that's* my fault. Molly, can't you speak to me? How could I tell I should find you and the parson alone here, and all safe? I might have been risking my—my—freedom—everything I care for; but when I heard he was ill, I couldn't stay quiet. Is he dying?—what's the matter? Molly, can't you speak?"

"Oh, Mr Wentworth, somebody will see him," cried Miss Wodehouse, wringing her hands. "Oh Tom, Tom, how could you do it? Suppose somebody was to come in—John, or somebody. If you care for your own life, oh, go away, go away!"

"They can't touch my life," said the stranger, sullenly. "I daresay she doesn't know that. Nor the parson need not look superior—there are more people concerned than I ; but if I've risked everything to hear, you may surely tell me how the old man is."

"If it was love that brought you," said poor Miss Wodehouse ; "but oh, Tom, you know I can't believe that. He is very, very ill ; and it is you that have done it," cried the mild woman, in a little gush of passion—"you whom he has forgiven and forgiven till his heart is sick. Go away. I tell you, go away from the house that you have shamed. Oh, Mr Wentworth, take him away," she cried, turning to the Curate with clasped hands—"tell him to hide—to fly—or he'll be taken : he will not be forgiven this time ; and if my father—if my dear father dies——" But when she got so far her agitation interrupted her. She kept her eyes upon the door with a wild look of terror, and waved her helpless hands to warn the intruder away.

"If he dies, matters will be altered," said the stranger ; "you and I might change places then, for that matter. I'm going away from Carlingford. I can't stay in such a wretched hole any

longer. It's gout or something?" said the man, with a tone of nature breaking through his bravado—"it's not anything that has happened? Say so, and I'll never trouble you more."

"Oh, if Lucy were to see him!" said poor Miss Wodehouse. The words came unawares out of her heart without any thought; but the next thing of which she was conscious was that the Perpetual Curate had laid his hand on the stranger's arm, and was leading him reluctantly away. "I will tell you all you want to know," said Mr Wentworth, "but not here;" and with his hand upon the other's arm, moved him somehow with an irresistible command, half physical, half mental, to the door. Before Miss Wodehouse could say anything they were gone; before she could venture to draw that long sighing breath of relief, she heard the door below close, and the retreating footsteps in the garden. But the sound, thankful though she was, moved her to another burst of bitter tears. "To think I should have to tell a stranger to take him away," she sobbed out of the anguish of her heart; and sat weeping over him with a relenting that wrung her tender spirit, without power to move till the servant came up with alarmed looks to ask if any one had come in in his absence.

"Oh, no ; it was only Mr Wentworth—and a—gentleman who came to fetch him," said Miss Wodehouse. And she got up, trembling as she was, and told John he had better shut up the house and go to bed. "For I hope papa will have a better night, and we must not waste our strength," she said, with a kind of woeful smile, which was a wonder to John. He said Miss Wodehouse was a tender-hearted one, to be sure, when he went down-stairs ; but that was no very novel piece of information to anybody there.

Meantime the Curate went down Grange Lane with that strange lodger of Mrs Hadwin's, who had broken thus into Miss Wodehouse's solitude. They did not say much to each other as they went sullenly side by side down the silent road ;—for the stranger, whose feelings were not complicated by any very lively sense of gratitude, looked upon his companion as a kind of jailer, and had an unspeakable grudge against the man who exercised so calm an ascendancy over him ; though to be sure it might have been difficult to resist the moral force of the Curate of St Roque's, who was three inches taller than himself, and had the unbroken vigour of youth and health to back him. As for Mr

Wentworth, he went on without speaking, with a bitterness in his heart not to be expressed. His own personal stronghold of happiness and consolation had shattered in pieces in that evening's interview ; and as he went to his own house he asked himself what he should find in it ? This wretched man, with whose sins he had been hitherto but partially acquainted ; and Jack, with whom the other had heaven knew what horrible connection. Should he find a den of thieves where he had left only high thoughts and lofty intentions ? It was thus, after his three days' absence, that he returned home.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHEN Mr Wentworth entered Mrs Hadwin's garden in the dark, his first glance up at the house showed him that a certain change had passed on it also. The decorous little house had been turned inside out. The windows of his own sitting-room were open, the blind drawn up to the top, and in addition to his usual lamp some candles were flaring wildly in the draught. He could see into the room as he paused at the garden door, and was able to distinguish that the table was still covered as for dinner, and to catch the purple gleam of the light in the claret-jug which occupied the place of honour ; but nobody was visible in the room. That wildly-illuminated and open apartment stood in strange contrast with the rest of the house, where everything was dark, save in Mrs Hadwin's own chamber. The Curate proceeded on his way,

after that moment's pause, with hasty and impatient steps. On the way up he encountered Sarah the housemaid, who stopped in the middle of the stairs to make a frightened little curtsy, and utter an alarmed "La!" of recognition and surprise. But Sarah turned round as soon as she had recovered herself, to say that her missis wanted very bad to see Mr Wentworth as soon as he came home; but she was gone to bed now, and didn't he think it would be a pity to wake her up? The Curate gave her only a little nod of general acquiescence, as he hurried on; but felt, notwithstanding, that this prompt request, ready prepared for his arrival, was a tacit protest against his guests, and expression of disapproval. Mrs Hadwin was only his landlady, an old woman, and not a particularly wise one, but her disapproval vexed the Perpetual Curate. It was a kind of sign of the times—those times in which it appeared that everybody was ready to turn upon him and embarrass his path. He had forgotten all about his companion as he hurried into the familiar room which was so little like itself, but yet was somehow conscious with annoyance that the stranger followed him through its half-shut door. The scene within was one which was never effaced from Mr Wentworth's

memory. There were several bottles upon the table, which the poor Curate knew by sight, and which had been collected in his little cellar more for the benefit of Wharfside than of himself. Removed out of the current of air which was playing freely through the apartment, was some one lying on a sofa, with candles burning on a table beside him. He was in a dressing-gown, with his shirt open at the throat, and his languid frame extended in perfect repose to catch the refreshment of the breeze. Clouds of languid smoke, which were too far out of the way to feel the draught between the windows, curled over him : he had a cigar in one hand, which he had just taken from his lips, and with which he was faintly waving off a big night-moth which had been attracted by the lights ; and a French novel, unmistakable in its paper cover, had closed upon the other. Altogether a more languid figure never lay at rest in undisturbed possession of the most legitimate retirement. He had the Wentworth hair, the golden-brown, which, like all their other family features, even down to their illnesses, the race was proud of, and a handsome silky beard. He had lived a hard life of pleasure and punishment ; but though he had reached middle age, there was

not a hair on the handsome reprobate's head which had changed out of its original colour. He looked languidly up when the door opened, but did not stop the delicate fence which he was carrying on against the moth, nor the polyglot oaths which he was swearing at it softly half under his breath.

"Frank, I suppose ?" he said, calmly, as the Curate came hastily forward. "How d'ye do? I am very glad you've come back. The country was very charming the first day, but that's a charm that doesn't last. I suppose you've dined: or will you ring and order something ?" he said, turning slowly round on his sofa. "Accidente! the thing will kill itself after all. Would you mind catching it in your handkerchief before you sit down? But don't take away the candles. It's too late to make any exertion," said the elegant prodigal, leaning back languidly on his sofa; "but I assure you that light is half my life."

The Curate was tired, heated, and indignant. He lifted the candles away from the table, and then put them back again, too much excited to think of the moth. "Your arrival must have been very sudden," he said, throwing himself into the nearest chair. "I was very much sur-

prised by your message. It looks inhospitable, but I see you make yourself quite at home——”

“Perfectly,” said the elder brother, resuming his cigar. “I always do. It is much more agreeable for all parties. But I don’t know how it is that a man’s younger brothers are always so rapid and unreasonable in their movements. Instead of saving that unhappy insect, you have precipitated its fate. Poor thing!—and it had no soul,” said the intruder, with a tone of pathos. The scene altogether was a curious one. Snugly sheltered from the draught, but enjoying the coolness of the atmosphere which it produced, lay the figure on the sofa at perfect ease and leisure, with the light shed brightly upon him, on his shining beard, the white cool expanse of linen at his breast, and the bright hues of his dressing-gown. Near him, fatigued, dusty, indignant, and perplexed, sat the Curate, with the night air playing upon him, and moving his disordered hair on his forehead; while at the other end of the room hovered the stranger who had followed Mr Wentworth—a broad, shabby, indistinct figure, who stood with his back to the others, looking vaguely out of the window into the darkness. Over these two the night air blew with no small force between the open win-

dows, making the candles on the centre table flare wildly, and flapping the white tablecloth. An occasional puff from the cigar floated now and then across the room. It was a pause before the storm.

"I was about to say," said the Perpetual Curate, "that though it might seem inhospitable, the first thing I had to ask was, What brought you here—and why did you send for me?"

"Don't be abrupt, pray," said Jack, taking his cigar from his mouth, and slightly waving the hand that held it. "Don't let us plunge into business all at once. You bring a sense of fatigue into the room with you, and the atmosphere was delightful a little while ago. I flatter myself I know how to enjoy the cool of the evening. Suppose you were to—ah—refresh yourself a little," he said, with a disapproving glance at his brother's dusty boots, "before we begin to talk of our affairs."

The Curate of St Roque's got up from his chair, feeling that he had an unchristian inclination to kick the heir of the Wentworths. As he could not do that, he shut the window behind him emphatically, and extinguished the flaring candles on the centre table. "I detest a draught," said the Perpetual Curate, which, un-

fortunately, was not a statement entirely founded on fact, though so far true in the present instance that he hated anything originated by the intruder. "I have hurried home in reply to your message, and I should be glad to know what it means, now that I am here—what you are in trouble about—and why you come to me—and what you have to do with him ?"

"But you need not have deranged the temperature," said Jack. "Impetuosity always distresses me. All these are questions which it will take some time to answer. Let me persuade you, in the first place, to make yourself comfortable. Don't mind me; I am at the crisis of my novel, which is very interesting. I have just been thinking how it might be adapted for the stage—there's a character that Fechter could make anything of. Now, my dear fellow, don't stand on ceremony. Take a bath and change your dress, and in the mean time there will be time to cook something—the cookery here is not bad for the country. After that we'll discuss all our news. I daresay our friend there is in no hurry," said the elder brother, opening his book and puffing slowly towards the Curate the languid smoke of his cigar.

"But, by Jove, I *am* in a hurry, though," said that nameless individual, coming forward. "It's all very well for you : you put a man up to everything that's dangerous, and then you leave him in the lurch, and say it don't matter. I daresay it don't matter to you. All that you've done has been to share the profit—you've nothing to do with the danger ; but I'm savage to-night, and I don't mean to stand it any more," said the stranger, his great chest expanding with a panting breath. He, too, looked as if he would have liked to seize the languid spectator in his teeth and shake some human feeling into him. Jack Wentworth raised his eyebrows and looked at him, as he might have looked at a wild beast in a rage.

"Sit down, savage, and be quiet," he said. "Why should I trouble myself about you ?—any fool could get into your scrape. I am not in the habit of interfering in a case of common crime. What I do, I do out of pity," he continued, with an air of superiority, quite different from his tone to his brother. But this look, which had answered before, was not successful to-night.

"By Jove, I *am* savage !" said the other, setting his teeth, "and I know enough of your

ways to teach you different behaviour. The parson has treated me like a gentleman—like what I used to be, though he don't like me ; but you !—— By Jove ! It was only my own name I signed, after all," he continued, after a pause, lowering his voice ; "but you, you blackleg——"

"Stop a little," said the Curate, rising up. "Though you seem both to have forgotten it, this is my room. I don't mean to have any altercations here. I have taken you in for the sake of your — family," said Mr Wentworth, with a momentary gasp, "and you have come because you are my brother. I don't deny any natural claims upon me ; but I am master of my own house, and my own leisure. Get up, Jack, and tell me what you want. When I understand what it is, you can lounge at your will ; but in the mean time get up and explain : and as for you, Wodehouse——"

Jack Wentworth faced round on his sofa, and then, with a kind of involuntary motion, slid his feet to the ground. He looked at his brother with extreme amazement as he closed his novel and tossed away the end of his cigar. "It's much better not to mention names," he said, in a half-apologetic way. "Our friend

here is under a temporary cloud. His name, in fact, is—Smith, I think.” But as he spoke he sat upright, a little startled to find that Frank, whom he remembered only as a lad, was no longer to be coerced and concussed. As for the other, he came forward with the alacrity of a man who began to see some hope.

“By Jove, my name *is* Wodehouse, though,” he said, in the argumentative tone which seemed habitual to him; his voice came low and grumbling through his beard. He was not of the class of triumphant sinners, whatever wickedness he might be capable of. To tell the truth, he had long, long ago fallen out of the butterfly stage of dissipation, and had now to be the doer of dirty work, despised and hustled about by such men as Jack Wentworth. The wages of sin had long been bitter enough, though he had neither any hope of freeing himself, nor any wish to do so; but he took up a grumbling tone of self-assertion as soon as he had an opening. “The parson treats me like a gentleman—like what I used to be,” he repeated, coming into the light, and drawing a chair towards the table. “My name is Wodehouse—it’s my own name that I have signed after all, by Jove!” said the unlucky prodigal. It seemed to give

him a little comfort to say that over again, as if to convince himself.

"As for Wodehouse, I partly understand what he has done," said the Curate. "It appears likely he has killed his father, by the way; but I suppose you don't count that. It is forgery in the mean time; I understand as much."

"It's my name as well as his, by Jove!" interrupted, hastily, the stranger, under his breath.

"Such strong terms are unnecessary," said Jack; "everybody knows that bills are drawn to be renewed, and nursed, and taken care of. We've had a great failure in luck as it happens, and these ones have come down to this deuced place; and the old fellow, instead of paying them like a gentleman, has made a row, and dropped down dead, or something. I suppose you don't know any more than the women have told you. The old man made a row in the office, and went off in fire and flame, and gave up our friend here to his partner's tender mercies. I sent for you, as you've taken charge of him. I suppose you have your reasons. This is an unlikely corner to find him in, and I suppose he couldn't be safer anywhere. That's about the state of the case. I came down to look after him, out of

kind feeling," said the heir of the Wentworths. "If you don't mean to eat any dinner, have a cigar."

"And what have you to do with each other? what is the connection between you?" said the Curate of St Roque's. "I have my reasons, as you say, for taking an interest in him—but you——"

"I am only your elder brother," said Jack, shrugging his shoulders and resuming his place on the sofa. "We understand that difference. Business connection—that's all," he said, leisurely selecting another cigar from his case. When he had lighted it, he turned round and fixed his eyes upon the stranger. "We don't want any harm to happen to him," he said, with a little emphasis. "I have come here to protect him. If he keeps quiet and doesn't show, it will blow over. The keenest spy in the place could scarcely suspect him to be here. I have come entirely on his account—much to my own disgust—and yours," said the exquisite, with another shrug. He laid back his head and looked up to the ceiling, contemplating the fragrant wreaths of smoke with the air of a man perfectly at his ease. "We don't mean him to come to any harm," said Jack Wentworth,

and stretched out his elegant limbs on the sofa, like a potentate satisfied that his protection was enough to make any man secure.

"I'm too much in their secrets, by Jove!" said poor Wodehouse, in his beard. "I *do* know their secrets, though they talk so big. It's not any consideration for me. It's to save themselves, by Jove, that's what it is!" cried the indignant drudge, of whom his superior deigned to take no notice. As for Mr Wentworth, he rose from his seat in a state of suppressed indignation, which could not express itself merely in words.

"May I ask what share I am expected to play in the drama?" he asked, pushing his chair aside in his excitement. The elder brother turned instinctively, and once more slid his feet to the ground. They looked at each other for a moment; the Curate, pale with a passion which he could not conceal, had something in his eyes which brought shame even to Jack Wentworth's face.

"You can betray him if you like," he said, sulkily. "I have no—particular interest in the matter; but in that case he had better make the best of his time and get away. You hear?" said the master-spirit, making a sign to Wode-

house. He had roused himself up, and looked now like a feline creature preparing for a spring —his eyes were cast down, but under the eyelids he followed his brother's movements with vigilant observation. “If you like, you can betray him,” he repeated, slowly, understanding, as bad men so often do, the generosities of the nature to which his own was so much opposed.

And perhaps there was an undue degree of exasperation in the indignant feelings which moved Mr Wentworth. He kicked off his dusty boots with an indecorum quite unusual to him, and hunted up his slippers out of the adjoining room with perhaps an unnecessary amount of noise and haste. Then he went and looked out of the window into the serene summer darkness and the dewy garden, getting a little fresh air upon his heated face. Last of all he came back, peremptory and decided. “I shall not betray him,” said the Perpetual Curate; “but I will have no further schemes concocted nor villany carried on in my house. If I consent to shield him, and, if possible, save him from the law, it is neither for his sake—nor yours,” said the indignant young man. “I suppose it is no use saying anything about your life; but both of you have fathers very like to die of this——”

"My dear fellow," said Jack Wentworth, "we have gone through that phase ages ago. Don't be so much after date. I have brought down my father's grey hairs, &c., a hundred times; and, I daresay, so has he. Don't treat us as if we were in the nursery—a parson of advanced views like you should have something a little more novel to say."

"And so I have," said Mr Wentworth, with a heightened colour. "There are capital rooms at the Blue Boar, which you will find very comfortable, I am sure. I don't remember that we have ever been more than acquaintances; and to take possession of a man's house in his absence argues a high degree of friendship, as you are aware. It will be with difficulty that I shall find room for myself to-night; but to-morrow, I trust, if business requires you to remain in Carlingford, you will be able to find accommodation at the Blue Boar."

The elder brother grew very red all over his face. "I will go at once," he said, with a little start; and then he took a second thought. "It is a poor sort of way of winning a victory," he said, in contemptuous tones, after he had overcome his first impulse; "but if you choose that, it is no matter to me. I'll go to-morrow, as you

say—to pack up to-night is too much for my energies. In the mean time it won't disturb you, I hope, if I go on with my novel. I don't suppose any further civilities are necessary between you and me," said Jack, once more putting up his feet on the sofa. He arranged himself with an indifference which was too genuine for bravado, opening his book, and puffing his cigar with great coolness. He did all but turn his back upon the others, and drew the little table nearer to him, in utter disregard of the fact that the Curate was leaning his arm on it. In short, he retired from the contest with a kind of grandeur, with his cigar and his novel, and the candles which lighted him up placidly, and made him look like the master of the house and the situation. There was a pause for some minutes, during which the others looked on—Mr Wentworth with a perfectly unreasonable sense of defeat, and poor Wodehouse with that strange kind of admiration which an unsuccessful good-for-nothing naturally feels for a triumphant rascal. They were in the shade looking on, and he in the light enjoying himself calmly in his way. The sight put an end to various twinges of repentance in the bosom of the inferior sinner. Jack Wentworth, lying on

the sofa in superb indifference, victorious over all sense of right, did more to confirm his humble admirer in the life which he had almost made up his mind to abandon, than even his own inclination towards forbidden pleasure. He was dazzled by the success of his principal ; and in comparison with that instructive sight, his father's probable deathbed, his sisters' tears, and even his own present discomfort, faded into insignificance. What Jack Wentworth was, Tom Wodehouse could never be ; but at least he could follow his great model humbly and afar off. These sentiments made him receive but sulkily the admonitions of the Curate, when he led the way out of the preoccupied sitting-room ; for Mr Wentworth was certainly not the victor in this passage of arms.

"I will do what I can to help you out of this," said the Curate, pausing within the door of Wodehouse's room, "for the sake of your — friends. But look here, Wodehouse ; I have not preached to you hitherto, and I don't mean to do so now. When a man has done a crime, he is generally past preaching. The law will punish you for forging your father's name——"

"It's *my* name as well as his, by Jove !" in-

terrupted the culprit, sullenly; “I’ve a right to sign it wherever I please.”

“But the law,” said Mr Wentworth, with emphasis, “has nothing to do with the breaking of your father’s heart. If he dies, think whether the recollection will be a comfortable one. I will save you, if I can, and there is time, though I am compromised already, and it may do me serious injury. If you get free and are cleared from this, will you go away and break off your connection with—yes, you are quite right—I mean with my brother, whatever the connection may be? I will only exert myself for you on condition that you promise. You will go away somehow, and break off your old habits, and try if it is possible to begin anew?”

Wodehouse paused before he answered. The vision of Jack in the Curate’s sitting-room still dazzled him. “You daren’t say as much to your brother as you say to me,” he replied, after a while, in his sulky way; “but I’m a gentleman, by Jove, as well as he is.” And he threw himself down in a chair, and bit his nails, and grumbled into his beard. “It’s hard to ask a fellow to give up his liberty,” he said, without lifting his eyes. Mr Wentworth, perhaps, was a little contemptuous of the sullen wretch who

already had involved him in so much annoyance and trouble.

"You can take your choice," he said ; "the law will respect your liberty less than I shall ;" and all the Curate's self-control could not conceal a certain amount of disdain.

"By Jove !" said Wodehouse, lifting up his eyes, "if the old man should die, you'd change your tone ;" and then he stopped short and looked suspiciously at the Curate. "There's no will, and I'm the heir," he said, with sullen braggadocio. Mr Wentworth was still young, and this look made him sick with disgust and indignation.

"Then you can take your chance," he said, impatiently, making a hasty step to the door. He would not return, though his ungrateful guest called him back, but went away, much excited and disgusted, to see if the fresh air outside would restore his composure. On his way down-stairs he again met Sarah, who was hovering about in a restless state of curiosity. "I've made up a bed for you, please, sir, in the little dressing-room," said Sarah ; "and, please, Cook wants to know, wouldn't you have anything to eat ?" The question reminded Mr Wentworth that he had eaten nothing since

luncheon, which he took in his father's house. Human nature, which can bear great blows with elasticity so wonderful, is apt to be put out, as everybody knows, by their most trifling accessories, and a man naturally feels miserable when he has had no dinner, and has not a place to shelter him while he snatches a necessary mouthful. "Never mind; all the rooms are occupied to-night," said the Perpetual Curate, feeling thoroughly wretched. But Cook and Sarah had arranged all that, being naturally indignant that their favourite clergyman should be "put upon" by his disorderly and unexpected guests.

"I have set your tray, sir, in missis's parlour," said Sarah, opening the door of that sanctuary; and it is impossible to describe the sense of relief with which the Perpetual Curate flung himself down on Mrs Hadwin's sofa, deranging a quantity of cushions and elaborate crochet-work draperies without knowing it. Here at least he was safe from intrusion. But his reflections were far from being agreeable as he ate his beef-steak. Here he was, without any fault of his own, plunged into the midst of a complication of disgrace and vice. Perhaps already the name of Lucy Wodehouse was branded with

her brother's shame ; perhaps still more overwhelming infamy might overtake, through that means, the heir and the name of the Wentworths. And for himself, what he had to do was to attempt with all his powers to defeat justice, and save from punishment a criminal for whom it was impossible to feel either sympathy or hope. When he thought of Jack up-stairs on the sofa over his French novel, the heart of the Curate burned within him with indignation and resentment ; and his disgust at his other guest was, if less intense, an equally painful sensation. It was hard to waste his strength, and perhaps compromise his character, for such men as these ; but on the other hand he saw his father, with that malady of the Wentworths hanging over his head, doing his best to live and last, like a courageous English gentleman as he was, for the sake of "the girls" and the little children, who had so little to expect from Jack ; and poor stupid Mr Wodehouse dying of the crime which assailed his own credit as well as his son's safety. The Curate of St Roque's drew a long breath, and raised himself up unconsciously to his full height as he rose to go up-stairs. It was he against the world at the moment, as it appeared. He set himself to

his uncongenial work with a heart that revolted against the evil cause of which he was about to constitute himself the champion. But for the Squire, who had misjudged him—for Lucy, who had received him with such icy smiles, and closed up her heart against his entrance ;—sometimes there is a kind of bitter sweetness in the thought of spending love and life in one lavish and prodigal outburst upon those to whom our hearts are bound, but whose affections make us no return.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE Curate went to breakfast next morning with a little curiosity and a great deal of painful feeling. He had been inhospitable to his brother, and a revulsion had happened such as happens invariably when a generous man is forced by external circumstances to show himself churlish. Though his good sense and his pride alike prevented him from changing his resolution of the previous night, still his heart had relented toward Jack, and he felt sorry and half ashamed to meet the brother to whom he had shown so much temper and so little kindness. It was much later than usual when he came down-stairs, and Jack was just coming out of the comfortable chamber which belonged of right to his brother, when the Curate entered the sitting-room. Jack was in his dressing-gown, as on the previous night, and came forth

humming an air out of the ‘Trovatore,’ and looking as wholesomely fresh and clean and dainty as the most honest gentleman in England. He gave his brother a good-humoured nod, and wished him good morning. “I am glad to see you don’t keep distressingly early hours,” he said, between the bars of the air he was humming. He was a man of perfect digestion, like all the Wentworths, and got up, accordingly, in a good temper, not disposed to make too much of any little incivility that might have taken place. On the contrary, he helped himself to his brother’s favourite omelet with the most engaging cheerfulness, and entered into such conversation as might be supposed to suit a Perpetual Curate in a little country town.

“I daresay you have a good many nice people about here,” said Jack. “I’ve done nothing but walk about since I came—and it does a man good to see those fresh little women with their pink cheeks. There’s one, a sister of our friend’s, I believe,” he continued, with a nod towards the door to indicate Wodehouse—“an uncommonly pretty girl, I can tell you; and there’s a little rosebud of a creature at that shop, whom, they tell me, you’re interested in. Your living is not

worth much, I suppose ? It's unlucky having two clergymen in a family; but, to be sure, you're going in for Skelmersdale. By the way, that reminds me—how are the aunts ? I have not heard anything of them for ages. Female relations of that description generally cling to the parsons of the race. I suppose they are all living—all three ? Such people never seem to die."

"They are here," said the Curate, succinctly, "living in Carlingford. I wonder nobody has told you."

A sudden bright spark lighted in the prodigal's eyes. "Ah, they are here, are they ?" he said, after a momentary pause ; "so much the better for you ; but in justice you ought to be content with the living. I say so as your elder brother. Gerald has the best right to what they've got to leave. By the by, how are Gerald and the rest ? you've just been there. I suppose our respected parent goes on multiplying. To think of so many odious little wretches calling themselves Wentworth is enough to make one disgusted with the name."

"My father was very ill when I left ; he has had another attack," said the Curate. "He does not seem able to bear any agitation. Your telegram upset him altogether. I don't know

what you've been about—he did not tell me," continued the younger brother, with a little emotion, "but he is very uneasy about you."

"Ah, I daresay," said Jack ; "that's natural ; but he's wonderfully tough for such an old fellow. I should say it would take twenty attacks to finish him ; and this is the second, isn't it ? I wonder how long an interval there was between the two ; it would be a pretty calculation for a *post-obit*. Wodehouse seems to have brought his ancestor down at the first shot almost ; but then there's no entail in his case, and the old fellow may have made a will. I beg your pardon ; you don't like this sort of talk. I forgot you were a clergyman. I rather like this town of yours, do you know. Sweet situation, and good for the health, I should say. I'll take your advice, I think, about the—how did you call it ?—Black Boar. Unless, indeed, some charitable family would take me in," said the elder brother, with a glance from under his eyelids. His real meaning did not in the least degree suggest itself to the Curate, who was thinking more of what was past than of what was to come.

"You seem to take a great interest in Wodehouse ?" said Mr Wentworth.

"Yes ; and so do you," said Jack, with a keen glance of curiosity—"I can't tell why. My interest in him is easily explained. If the affair came to a trial, it might involve other people who are of retiring dispositions and dislike publicity. I don't mind saying," continued the heir of the Wentworths, laying down his knife and fork, and looking across at his brother with smiling candour, "that I might myself be brought before the world in a way which would wound my modesty ; so it must not be permitted to go any further, you perceive. The partner has got a warrant out, but has not put it into execution as yet. That's why I sent for you. You are the only man, so far as I can see, that can be of any use."

"I don't know what you mean," said the Curate, hastily, "nor what connection you can possibly have with Wodehouse ; perhaps it is better not to inquire. I mean to do my best for him, independent of you."

"Do," said Jack Wentworth, with a slight yawn ; "it is much better not to inquire. A clergyman runs the risk of hearing things that may shock him when he enters into worldly business ; but the position of mediator is thoroughly professional. Now for the Black Boar.

I'll send for my traps when I get settled," he said, rising in his languid way. He had made a very good breakfast, and he was not at all disposed to make himself uncomfortable by quarrelling with his brother. Besides, he had a new idea in his mind. So he gave the Curate another little good-humoured nod, and disappeared into the sleeping-room, from which he emerged a few minutes after with a coat replacing the dressing-gown, ready to go out. "I daresay I shall see you again before I leave Carlingford," he said, and left the room with the utmost suavity. As for Mr Wentworth, it is probable that his brother's serenity had quite the reverse of a soothing effect upon his mind and temper. He rose from the table as soon as Jack was gone, and for a long time paced about the room composing himself, and planning what he was to do—so long, indeed, that Sarah, after coming up softly to inspect, had cleared the table and put everything straight in the room before the Curate discovered her presence. It was only when she came up to him at last, with her little rustical curtsy, to say that, please, her missis would like to see him for a moment in the parlour, that Mr Wentworth found out that she was there. This interrup-

tion roused him out of his manifold and complicated thoughts. "I am too busy just now, but I will see Mrs Hadwin to-night," he said; "and you can tell her that my brother has gone to get rooms at the Blue Boar." After he had thus satisfied the sympathetic handmaiden, the Curate crossed over to the closed door of Wodehouse's room and knocked. The inmate there was still in bed, as was his custom, and answered Mr Wentworth through his beard in a recumbent voice, less sulky and more uncertain than on the previous night. Poor Wodehouse had neither the nerve nor the digestion of his more splendid associate. He had no strength of evil in himself when he was out of the way of it; and the consequence of a restless night was a natural amount of penitence and shame in the morning. He met the Curate with a depressed countenance, and answered all his questions readily enough, even giving him the particulars of the forged bills, in respect to which Thomas Wodehouse the younger could not, somehow, feel so guilty as if it had been a name different from his own which he had affixed to those fatal bits of paper; and he did not hesitate much to promise that he would go abroad and try to make a new beginning if this

matter could be settled. Mr Wentworth went out with some satisfaction after the interview, believing in his heart that his own remonstrances had had their due effect, as it is so natural to believe—for he did not know, having slept very soundly, that it had rained a good deal during the night, and that Mrs Hadwin's biggest tub (for the old lady had a passion for rain-water) was immediately under poor Wodehouse's window, and kept him awake as it filled and ran over all through the summer darkness. The recollection of Jack Wentworth, even in his hour of success, was insufficient to fortify the simple soul of his humble admirer against that ominous sound of the unseen rain, and against the flashes of sudden lightning that seemed to blaze into his heart. He could not help thinking of his father's sick-bed in those midnight hours, and of all the melancholy array of lost years which had made him no longer "a gentleman as he used to be," but a skulking vagabond in his native place; and his penitence lasted till after he had had his breakfast and Mr Wentworth was gone. Then perhaps the other side of the question recurred to his mind, and he began to think that if his father died there might be no need for his banish-

ment; but Mr Wentworth knew nothing of this change in his protege's sentiments, as he went quickly up Grange Lane. Wharfside and all the district had lain neglected for three long days, as the Curate was aware, and he had promised to call at No. 10 Prickett's Lane, and to look after the little orphan children whom Lucy had taken charge of. His occupations, in short, both public and private, were overpowering, and he could not tell how he was to get through them ; for, in addition to everything else, it was Friday, and there was a litany service at twelve o'clock in St Roque's. So the young priest had little time to lose as he hurried up once again to Mr Wodehouse's green door.

It was Miss Wodehouse who came to meet the Curate as soon as his presence was known, in the house—Miss Wodehouse, and not Lucy, who made way for her sister to pass her, and took no notice of Mr Wentworth's name. The elder sister entered very hurriedly the little parlour down-stairs, and shut the door fast, and came up to him with an anxious inquiring face. She told him her father was just the same, in faltering tones. “And, oh, Mr Wentworth, has anything happened ?” she exclaimed, with end-

less unspeakable questions in her eyes. It was so hard for the gentle woman to keep her secret —the very sight of somebody who knew it was a relief to her heart.

“I want you to give me full authority to act for you,” said the Curate. “I must go to Mr Wodehouse’s partner and discuss the whole matter.”

Here Miss Wodehouse gave a little cry, and stopped him suddenly. “Oh, Mr Wentworth, it would kill papa to know you had spoken of it to any one. You must send him away,” she said, breathless with anxiety and terror. “To think of discussing it with any one when even Lucy does not know——!” She spoke with so much haste and fright that it was scarcely possible to make out her last words.

“Nevertheless I must speak to Mr Waters,” said the Curate; “I am going there now. He knows all about it already, and has a warrant for *his* apprehension; but we must stop that. I will undertake that it shall be paid, and you must give me full authority to act for you.” When Miss Wodehouse met the steady look he gave her, she veered immediately from her fright at the thought of having it spoken of, to gratitude to him who was thus ready to take her burden into his hands.

"Oh, Mr Wentworth, it is so good of you—it is like a brother!" said the trembling woman; and then she made a pause. "I say a brother," she said, drawing an involuntary moral, "though we have never had any good of ours; and oh, if Lucy only knew——!"

The Curate turned away hastily, and wrung her hand without being aware of it. "No," he said, with a touch of bitterness, "don't let her know. I don't want to appeal to her gratitude;" and with that he became silent, and fell to listening, standing in the middle of the room, if perhaps he might catch any sound of footsteps coming down-stairs.

"She will know better some day," said Miss Wodehouse, wiping her eyes; "and oh, Mr Wentworth, if papa ever gets better——!" Here the poor lady broke down into inarticulate weeping. "But I know you will stand by us," she said, amid her tears; "it is all the comfort I have—and Lucy——"

There was no sound of any footstep on the stair—nothing but the ticking of the timepiece on the mantelshelf, and the rustling of the curtains in the soft morning breeze which came through the open window, and Miss Wodehouse's crying. The Curate had not expected to see

Lucy, and knew in his heart that it was better they should not meet just at this moment; but, notwithstanding this, it was strange how bitter and disappointed he felt, and what an impatient longing he had for one look of her, even though it should be a look which would drive him frantic with mortified love and disappointed expectation. To know that she was under the same roof, and that she knew he was here, but kept away, and did not care to see him, was gall to his excited mind. He went away hastily, pressing poor Miss Wodehouse's hand with a kind of silent rage. "Don't talk about Lucy," he said, half to himself, his heart swelling and throbbing at the sound of the name. It was the first time he had spoken it aloud to any ear but his own, and he left the house tingling with an indignation and mortification and bitter fondness which could not be expressed in words. What he was about to do was for her sake, and he thought to himself, with a forlorn pride, that she would never know it, and it did not matter. He could not tell that Lucy was glancing out furtively over the blind, ashamed of herself in her wounded heart for doing so, and wondering whether even now he was occupied with that unworthy love which had made an everlasting

separation between them. If it had been any one worthy, it would have been different, poor Lucy thought, as she pressed back the tears into her eyes, and looked out wistfully at him over the blind. She above-stairs in the sick-room, and he in the fresh garden hastening out to his work, were both thinking in their hearts how perverse life was, and how hard it was not to be happy—as indeed they well might in a general way ; though perhaps one glance of the Curate's eyes upward, one meeting of looks, might have resulted quite unreasonably in a more felicitous train of thinking, at least for that day.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHEN Mr Wentworth arrived in the little vestry at St Roque's to robe himself for the approaching service, it was after a long and tough contest with Mr Wodehouse's partner, which had to a great extent exhausted his energies. Mr Wodehouse was the leading attorney in Carlingford, the chief family solicitor in the county, a man looked upon with favourable eyes even by the great people as being himself a cadet of a county family. His partner, Mr Waters, was altogether a different description of man. He was much more clever, and a good deal more like a gentleman, but he had not a connection in the world, and had fought his way up to prosperity through many a narrow, and perhaps, if people spoke true, many a dirty avenue to fortune. He was very glad of the chance which brought his partner's reputation and credit thus under his

power, and he was by no means disposed to deal gently with the prodigal son. That is to say, he was quite disinclined to let the family out of his clutches easily, or to consent to be silent and "frustrate the ends of justice" for anything else than an important equivalent. Mr Wentworth had much ado to restrain his temper while the wily attorney talked about his conscience ; for the Curate was clear-sighted enough to perceive at the first glance that Mr Waters had no real intention of proceeding to extremities. The lawyer would not pledge himself to anything, notwithstanding all Mr Wentworth's arguments. "Wodehouse himself was of the opinion that the law should take its course," he said ; but out of respect for his partner he might wait a few days to see what turn his illness would take. "I confess that I am not adapted for my profession, Mr Wentworth. My feelings overcome me a great deal too often," said the sharp man of business, looking full into the Curate's eyes, "and while the father is dying I have not the heart to proceed against the son ; but I pledge myself to nothing—recollect, to nothing." And with this and a very indignant mind Mr Wentworth had been forced to come away. His thoughts were occupied with the contrarieties of

the world as he hastened along to St Roque's—how one man had to bear another's burdens in every station and capacity of life, and how another man triumphed and came to success by means of the misfortunes of his friends. It was hard to tell what made the difference, or how humankind got divided into these two great classes, for possibly enough the sharp attorney was as just in his way as the Curate ; but Mr Wentworth got no more satisfaction in thinking of it than speculatists generally have when they investigate this strange, wayward, fantastical humanity which is never to be calculated upon. He came into the little vestry of St Roque's, which was a stony little room with a groined roof and windows too severely English in their character to admit any great amount of light, with a sensation of fatigue and discouragement very natural to a man who had been interfering in other people's affairs. There was some comfort in the litany which he was just going to say, but not much comfort in any of the human individuals who would come into Mr Wentworth's mind as he paused in the midst of the suffrage for "sick persons" and for those who "had erred and were deceived," that the worshippers might whisper into God's ear the names for which their

hearts were most concerned. The young priest sighed heavily as he put on his surplice, pondering all the obstinate selfishness and strange contradictions of men ; and it was only when he heard a rather loud echo to his breath of weariness that he looked up and saw Elsworthy, who was contemplating him with a very curious expression of face. The clerk started a little on being discovered, and began to look over all the choristers' books and set them in readiness, though, indeed, there were no choristers on Fridays, but only the ladies, who chanted the responses a great deal more sweetly, and wore no surplices. Thinking of that, it occurred to Mr Wentworth how much he would miss the round full notes which always betrayed Lucy's presence to him even when he did not see her ; and he forgot Elsworthy, and sighed again without thinking of any comment which might be made upon the sound.

"I'm sorry to see, sir, as you ain't in your usual good spirits ?" said that observant spectator, coming closer up to "his clergyman." Elsworthy's eyes were full of meanings which Mr Wentworth could not, and had no wish to, decipher.

"I am perfectly well, thank you," said the Perpetual Curate, with his coldest tone. He

had become suspicious of the man, he could scarcely tell why.

"There's a deal of people in church this morning," said the clerk; and then he came closer still, and spoke in a kind of whisper, "About that little matter as we was speaking of, Mr Wentworth—that's all straight, sir, and there ain't no occasion to be vexed. She came back this morning," said Elsworthy, under his breath.

"Who came back this morning?" asked the Curate, with a little surprise. His thoughts had been so much with Lucy that no one else occurred to him at the moment; and even while he asked this question, his busy fancy began to wonder where she could have been, and what motive could have taken her away?

"I couldn't mean nobody but Rosa, as I talked to you about last night," said Elsworthy. "She's come back, sir, as you wished; and I *have* heard as she was in Carlingford last night just afore you come, Mr Wentworth, when I thought as she was far enough off; which you'll allow, sir, whoever it was she come to see, it wasn't the right thing, nor what her aunt and me had reason to expect."

The Curate of St Roque's said "Pshaw!"

carelessly to himself. He was not at all interested in Rosa Elsworthy. Instead of making any answer, he drew on the scarlet band of his hood, and marched away gravely into the reading-desk, leaving the vestry-door open behind him for the clerk to follow. The little dangers that harassed his personal footsteps had not yet awakened so much as an anxiety in his mind. Things much more serious preoccupied his thoughts. He opened his prayer-book with a consciousness of the good of it which comes to men only now and then. At Oxford, in his day, Mr Wentworth had entertained his doubts like others, and like most people was aware that there were a great many things in heaven and earth totally unexplainable by any philosophy. But he had always been more of a man than a thinker, even before he became a high Anglican ; and being still much in earnest about most things he had to do with, he found great comfort just at this moment, amid all his perplexities, in the litany he was saying. He was so absorbed in it, and so full of that appeal out of all troubles and miseries to the God who cannot be indifferent to His creatures, that he was almost at the last Amen before he distinguished that voice, which of all voices was most dear to

him. The heart of the young man swelled, when he heard it, with a mingled thrill of sympathy and wounded feeling. She had not left her father's sick-bed to see *him*, but she *had* found time to run down the sunny road to St Roque's to pray for the sick and the poor. When he knelt down in the reading-desk at the end of the service, was it wrong, instead of more abstract supplications, that the young priest said over and over, "God bless her," in an outburst of pity and tenderness? And he did not try to overtake her on the road, as he might have done had his heart been less deeply touched, but went off with abstracted looks to Wharfside, where all the poor people were very glad to see him, and where his absence was spoken of as if he had been three months instead of three days away. It was like going back a century or two into primitive life, to go into "the district," where civilisation did not prevail to any very distressing extent, and where people in general spoke their minds freely. But even when he came out of No. 10, where the poor woman still kept on living, Mr Wentworth was made aware of his private troubles; for on the opposite side of the way, where there was a little bit of vacant ground, the Rector was standing with some of

the schismatics of Wharfside, planning how to place the iron church which, it was said, he meant to establish in the very heart of the "district." Mr Morgan took off his hat very stiffly to the Perpetual Curate, who returned up Prickett's Lane with a heightened colour and quickened pulse. A man must be an angel indeed who can see his work taken out of his hands and betray no human emotion. Mr Wentworth went into Elsworthy's, as he went back, to write a forcible little note to the Rector on the subject before he returned home. It was Rosa who handed him the paper he wanted, and he gave her a little nod without looking at her. But when he had closed his note, and laid it on the counter to be delivered, the Curate found her still standing near, and looked at the little blushing creature with some natural admiration. "So you have come back," he said ; "but mind you don't go into Grange Lane any more after dark, little Rosa." When he had left the shop and finished this little matter, he bethought himself of his aunts, whom he had not seen since he returned. Aunt Dora was not at her usual sentinel window when he crossed Grange Lane towards their garden-door ; and the door itself was open, and some

one from the Blue Boar was carrying in a large portmanteau. Mr Wentworth's curiosity was strangely excited by the sight. He said, "Who has come, Lewis?" to Miss Wentworth's man, who stood in the hall superintending the arrival, but ran up-stairs without waiting for any answer. He felt by instinct that the visitor was some one likely to increase the confusion of affairs, and perplex matters more and more to himself.

But even this presentiment did not prepare him for the astonishing sight which met his eyes when he entered the drawing-room. There the three ladies were all assembled, regarding with different developments of interest the newcomer, who had thrown himself, half-reclining, on a sofa. Aunt Dora was sitting by him with a bottle of eau-de-Cologne in her hand, for this meeting had evidently gone to the heart of the returned prodigal. Aunt Dora was ready to have sacrificed all the veal in the country in honour of Jack's repentance; and the Curate stood outside upon the threshold, looking at the scene with the strangest half-angry, half-comical realisation of the state of mind of the elder brother in the parable. He had himself been rather found fault with, excused, and tolerated

among his relations ; but Jack had at once become master of the position, and taken possession of all their sympathies. Mr Wentworth stood gazing at them, half-amused, and yet more angry than amused—feeling, with a little indignation, as was natural, that the pretended penitence of the clever sinner was far more effective and interesting than his own spotless loyalty and truth. To be sure, they were only three old ladies—three old aunts—and he smiled at the sight ; but though he smiled, he did not like it, and perhaps was more abrupt than usual in his salutations. Miss Leonora was seated at her writing-table, busy with her correspondence. The question of the new gin-palace was not yet decided, and she had been in the middle of a letter of encouragement to her agents on the subject, reminding them that, even though the licence was granted, the world would still go on all the same, and that the worst possibilities must be encountered, when Jack the prodigal made his appearance, with all the tokens of reformation and repentance about him, to throw himself upon the Christian charity of his relations. A penitent sinner was too tempting a bait for even Miss Leonora's good sense to withstand, and she had postponed her letter-

writing to hear his explanations. But Jack had told his story by this time, and had explained how much he wanted to withdraw out of the world in which he had been led astray, and how sick he was of all its whirl of temptations and disappointment ; and Miss Leonora had returned to her letter when her younger nephew arrived. As for Miss Wentworth, she was seated placidly in her usual easy-chair, smiling with equable smiles upon both the young men, and lifting her beautiful old cheek for Frank to kiss, just as she had lifted it to Jack. It was Miss Dora who was most shaken out of her allegiance ; she who had always made Frank her special charge. Though she had wept herself into a day's headache on his behalf so short a time ago, aunt Dora for the moment had allowed the more effusive prodigal to supersede Frank. Instead of taking him into her arms as usual, and clinging to him, she only put the hand that held the eau-de-Cologne over his shoulder as she kissed him. Jack, who had been so dreadfully, inexpressibly wicked, and who had come back to his aunts to be converted and restored to his right mind, was more interesting than many curates. She sat down again by her penitent as soon as she had saluted his brother ;

and even Miss Leonora, when she paused in her letter, turned her eyes towards Jack.

"So Gerald is actually going over to Rome," said the strong-minded aunt. "I never expected anything else. I had a letter from Louisa yesterday, asking me to use my influence: as if I had any influence over your brother! If a silly wife was any justification for a man making an idiot of himself, Gerald might be excused; but I suppose the next thing we shall hear of will be that you have followed him, Frank. Did you hear anything further about Janet and that lover of hers? In a large family like ours there is always something troublesome going on," said Miss Leonora. "I am not surprised to hear of your father's attack. *My* father had a great many attacks, and lived to eighty; but he had few difficulties with the female part of his household," she continued, with a grim little smile—for Miss Leonora rather piqued herself upon her exemption from any known sentimental episode, even in her youth.

"Dear Jack's return will make up for a great deal," said aunt Dora. "Oh, Frank, my dear, your brother has made us all so happy. He has just been telling us that he means to give



up all his racing and betting and wickedness ; and when he has been with us a little, and learned to appreciate a domestic circle——” said poor Miss Dora, putting her handkerchief to her eyes. She was so much overcome that she could not finish the sentence. But she put her disengaged hand upon Jack’s arm and patted it, and in her heart concluded that as soon as the blanket was done for Louisa’s bassinet, she would work him a pair of slippers, which should endear more and more to him the domestic circle, and stimulate the new-born virtue in his repentant heart.

“ I don’t know what Jack’s return may do,” said Mr Wentworth, “ but I hope you don’t imagine it was Gerald who caused my father’s illness. *You* know better, at least,” said the indignant Curate, looking at the hero on the sofa. That interesting reprobate lifted his eyes with a covert gleam of humour to the unresponsive countenance of his brother, and then stroked his silky beard and sighed.

“ My dear aunt, Frank is right,” said Jack, with a melancholy voice. “ I have not concealed from you that my father has great reason to be offended with me. I have done very much the reverse of what I ought to have done.

I see even Frank can't forgive me ; and I don't wonder at it," said the prodigal, " though I have done him no harm that I know of ;" and again the heir of the Wentworths sighed, and covered his face for a moment with his hand.

" Oh, Frank," cried Miss Dora, with streaming eyes—" oh, my dear boy !—isn't there joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth ? You're not going to be the wicked elder brother that grudged the prodigal his welcome—you're not going to give way to jealousy, Frank ?"

" Hold your tongue, Dora," said the iron-grey sister ; " I daresay Frank knows a great deal better than you do ; but I want to know about Gerald, and what is to be done. If he goes to Rome, of course you will take Wentworth Rectory ; so it will not be an unmixed evil," said Miss Leonora, biting her pen, and throwing a keen glance at the Curate of St Roque's, " especially as you and we differ so entirely in our views. I could not consent to appoint anybody to Skelmersdale, even if poor Mr Shirley were to die, who did not preach the Gospel ; and it would be sad for you to spend all your life in a Perpetual Curacy, where you could have no income, nor ever hope to be able to marry," she continued steadily, with her eyes fixed

upon her nephew. “Of course, if you had entered the Church for the love of the work, it would be a different matter,” said the strong-minded aunt. “But that sort of thing seems to have gone out of fashion. I am sorry about Gerald—very sorry; but after what I saw of him, I am not surprised; and it is a comfort to one’s mind to think that you will be provided for, Frank.” Miss Leonora wrote a few words of the letter as she finished this speech. What she was saying in that epistle was (in reference to the gin-palace) that all discouragements were sent by God, and that, no doubt, His meaning was, that we should work all the harder to make way against them. After putting down which encouraging sentiment, she raised her eyes again, and planted her spear in her nephew’s bosom with the greatest composure in the world.

“My Perpetual Curacy suits me very well,” said Mr Wentworth, with a little pride; “and there is a good deal to do in Carlingford. However, I did not come here to talk about that. The Rector is going to put up an iron church in my district,” said the young man, who was rather glad of a subject which permitted a little of his indignation to escape. “It is very

easy to interfere with other people's work." And then he paused, not choosing to grumble to an unsympathetic audience. To feel that nobody cares about your feelings, is better than all the rules of self-control. The Perpetual Curate stopped instinctively with a dignified restraint, which would have been impossible to him under other circumstances. It was no merit of his, but he reaped the advantage of it all the same.

"But oh, my dear," said Miss Dora, "what a comfort to think of what St Paul says—'Whether it be for the right motive or not, Christ is still preached.' And one never knows what chance word may touch a heart," said the poor little woman, shaking her limp curls away from her cheeks. "It was you being offended with him that made dear Jack think of coming to us ; and what a happiness it is to think that he sees the error of his ways," cried poor Miss Dora, drying her tears. "And oh, Frank, my dear boy, I trust you will take warning by your brother, and not run into temptation," continued the anxious aunt, remembering all her troubles. "If you were to go wrong, it would take away all the pleasure of life."

"That is just what I was thinking," said aunt Cecilia from her easy-chair.

"For, oh, Frank, my dear," said Miss Dora, much emboldened by this support, "you must consider that you are a clergyman, and there are a great many things that are wrong in a clergyman that would not matter in another man. Oh, Leonora, if you would speak to him, he would mind you," cried the poor lady; "for you know a clergyman is quite different;" and Miss Dora again stopped short, and the three aunts looked at the bewildered Curate, who, for his part, sat gazing at them without an idea what they could mean.

"What have I been doing that would be right in another man?" he said, with a smile which was slightly forced; and then he turned to Jack, who was laughing softly under his breath, and stroking his silky beard. The elder brother was highly amused by the situation altogether, but Frank, as was natural, did not see it in the same light. "What have you been saying?" said the indignant Curate; and his eyes gave forth a sudden light which frightened Miss Dora, and brought her in to the rescue.

"Oh, Frank, he has not been saying anything," cried that troubled woman; "it is only what we have heard everywhere. Oh, my dear boy, it is only for your good I ever thought of speak-

ing. There is nobody in the world to whom your welfare is so precious," said poor Miss Dora. "Oh, Frank, if you and your brother were to have any difference, I should think it all my fault—and I always said you did not mean anything," she said, putting herself and her eau-de-Cologne between the two, and looking as if she were about to throw herself into the Curate's arms. "Oh, Frank, dear, don't blame any one else—it is my fault!" cried aunt Dora, with tears; and the tender-hearted foolish creature kept between them, ready to rush in if any conflict should occur, which was a supposition much resented by the Curate of St Roque's.

"Jack and I have no intention of fighting, I daresay," he said, drawing his chair away with some impatience; and Jack lay back on the sofa and stroked his beard, and looked on with the greatest composure while poor Miss Dora exhausted her alarm. "It is all my fault," sobbed aunt Dora; "but, oh, my dear boy, it was only for your good; and I always said you did not mean anything," said the discomfited peacemaker. All this, though it was highly amusing to the prodigal, was gall and bitterness to the Perpetual Curate. It moved him far more deeply than he could have imagined it possible

for anything spoken by his aunt Dora to move him. Perhaps there is something in human nature which demands to be comprehended, even where it is aware that comprehension is impossible ; and it wounded him in the most unreasonable way to have it supposed that he was likely to get into any quarrel with his brother, and to see Jack thus preferred to himself.

“ Don’t be a fool,” said Miss Leonora, sharply : “ I wish you would confine yourself to Louisa’s bassinet, and talk of things you can understand. I hope Frank knows what he is doing better than a set of old women. At the same time, Frank,” said Miss Leonora, rising and leading the way to the door, “ I want to say a word to you. Don’t think you are above misconception. Most people believe a lie more readily than the truth. Dora is a fool,” said the elder sister, pausing, when she had led her nephew outside the drawing-room door, “ but so are most people ; and I advise you to be careful, and not to give occasion for any gossip ; otherwise, I don’t say *I* disapprove of your conduct.” She had her pen in one hand, and held out the other to him, dismissing him ; and even this added to the painful feeling in the Curate’s heart.

“ I should hope not,” he said, somewhat stiffly;

"good-bye—my conduct is not likely to be affected by any gossip, and I don't see any need for taking precautions against imaginary danger." Miss Leonora thought her nephew looked very ungracious as he went away. She said to herself that Frank had a great deal of temper, and resembled his mother's family more than the Wentworths, as she went back to her writing-table ; and though she could not disapprove of him, she felt vexed somehow at his rectitude and his impatience of advice ; whereas, Jack, poor fellow! who had been a great sinner, was, according to all appearance, a great penitent also, and a true Wentworth, with all the family features. Such were Miss Leonora's thoughts as she went back to finish her letters, and to encourage her agents in her London district to carry on the good work.

"God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform." she wrote apropos of the gin-palace, and set very distinctly before her spiritual retainers all that Providence might intend by this unexpected hindrance ; and so quite contented herself about her nephew, whose views on this and many other subjects were so different from her own.

Meanwhile Mr Wentworth went about the

rést of his day's work in a not unusual, but far from pleasant, frame of mind. When one suddenly feels that the sympathy upon which one calculated most surely has been withdrawn, the shock is naturally considerable. It might not be anything very great while it lasted, but still one feels the difference when it is taken away. Lucy had fallen off from him ; and even aunt Dora had ceased to feel his concerns the first in the world. He smiled at himself for the wound he felt ; but that did not remove the sting of it. After the occupations of the day were over, when at last he was going home, and when his work and the sense of fatigue which accompanied it had dulled his mind a little, the Curate felt himself still dwelling on the same matter, contemplating it in a half-comic point of view, as proud men are not unapt to contemplate anything that mortifies them. He began to realise, in a humorous way, his own sensations as he stood at the drawing-room door and recognised the prodigal on the sofa ; and then a smile dawned upon his lip as he thought once more of the prodigal's elder brother, who regarded that business with unsympathetic eyes and grudged the supper. And from that he went into a half-professional line of thought, and imagined to himself, half

smiling, how, if he had been Dr Cumming or the minister of Salem Chapel, he might have written a series of sermons on the unappreciated characters of Scripture, beginning with that virtuous uninteresting elder brother ; from which suggestion, though he was not the minister of Salem nor Dr Cumming, it occurred to the Perpetual Curate to follow out the idea, and to think of such generous careless souls as Esau, and such noble unfortunates as the peasant-king, the mournful magnificent Saul—people not generally approved of, or enrolled among the martyrs or saints. He was pursuing this kind of half-reverie, half-thought, when he reached his own house. It was again late and dark, for he had dined in the mean time, and was going home now to write his sermon, in which, no doubt, some of these very ideas were destined to reappear. He opened the garden-gate with his latch-key, and paused, with an involuntary sense of the beauty and freshness of the night, as soon as he got within the sheltering walls. The stars were shining faint and sweet in the summer blue, and all the shrubs and the grass breathing forth that subdued breath of fragrance and conscious invisible life which gives so much sweetness to the night. He thought he heard whispering

voices, as he paused glancing up at the sky ; and then from the side-walk he saw a little figure run, and heard a light little footstep fluttering towards the door which he had just closed. Mr Wentworth started and went after this little flying figure with some anxiety. Two or three of his long strides brought him up with the escaping visitor, as she fumbled in her agitation over the handle of the door. "You have come again, notwithstanding what I said to you ? but you must not repeat it, Rosa," said the Curate ; "no good can come of these meetings. I will tell your uncle, if I ever find you here again."

"Oh no, no, please don't," cried the girl ; "but, after all, I don't mind," she said, with more confidence : "he would think it was something very different ;" and Rosa raised her eyes to the Curate's face with a coquettish inquiry. She could not divest herself of the thought that Mr Wentworth was jealous, and did not like to have her come there for anybody but himself.

"If you were not such a child, I should be very angry," said the Curate ; "as it is, I *am* very angry with the person who deludes you into coming. Go home, child," he said, opening the door to her, "and remember I will not allow you on any pretext to come here again."

His words were low, and perhaps Rosa did not care much to listen ; but there was quite light enough to show them both very plainly, as he stood at the door and she went out. Just then the Miss Hemmings were going up Grange Lane from a little tea-party with their favourite maid, and all their eyes about them. They looked very full in Mr Wentworth's face, and said How d'ye do ? as they passed the door ; and when they had passed it, they looked at each other with eyes which spoke volumes. Mr Wentworth shut the door violently with irrepressible vexation and annoyance when he encountered that glance. He made no farewells, nor did he think of taking care of Rosa on the way home as he had done before. He was intensely annoyed and vexed, he could not tell how ; and this was how it happened that the last time she was seen in Carlingford, Rosa Elsworthy was left standing by herself in the dark at Mr Wentworth's door.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE Curate got up very early next morning. He had his sermon to write, and it was Saturday, and all the events of the week had naturally enough unsettled his mind, and indisposed him for sermon-writing. When the events of life come fast upon a man, it is seldom that he finds much pleasure in abstract literary composition, and the style of the Curate of St Roque's was not of that hortatory and impassioned character which sometimes gives as much relief to the speaker as excitement to the audience. So he got up in the early sweetness of the summer morning, when nobody but himself was astir in the house, with the sense of entering upon a task, and taking up work which was far from agreeable to him. When he came into the little room which he used as a study, and threw the window open, and breathed the delicious air of

the morning, which was all thrilling and trembling with the songs of birds, Mr Wentworth's thoughts were far from being concentrated upon any one subject. He sat down at his writing-table and arranged his pens and paper, and wrote down the text he had selected ; and when he had done so much, and could feel that he had made a beginning, he leaned back in his chair, and poised the idle pen on his finger, and abandoned himself to his thoughts. He had so much to think about. There was Wodehouse under the same roof, with whom he had felt himself constrained to remonstrate very sharply on the previous night. There was Jack, so near, and certainly come to Carlingford on no good errand. There was Gerald, in his great perplexity and distress, and the household at home in their anxiety ; and last, but worst of all, his fancy would go fluttering about the doors of the sick-chamber in Grange Lane, longing and wondering. He asked himself what it could be which had raised that impalpable wall between Lucy and himself—that barrier too strong to be overthrown, too ethereal to be complained of ; and wondered over and over again what her thoughts were towards him—whether she thought of him at all, whether she was offended, or simply in-

different?—a question which any one else who had observed Lucy as closely could have solved without any difficulty, but which, to the modest and true love of the Perpetual Curate, was at present the grand doubt of all the doubts in the universe. With this matter to settle, and with the consciousness that it was still only five o'clock, and that he was at least one hour beforehand with the world, it is easy to understand why Mr Wentworth mused and loitered over his work, and how, when it was nearly six o'clock, and Sarah and the cook were beginning to stir from their sleep, there still remained only the text written upon the sermon-paper, which was so nicely arranged before him on the table. “When the wicked man turneth away from the evil of his ways and doeth that which is lawful and right.”—This was the text; but sitting at the open window, looking out into the garden, where the birds, exempt, as they seemed to think, for once from the vulgar scrutiny of man, were singing at the pitch of all their voices as they prepared for breakfast; and where the sweet air of the morning breathed into his mind a freshness and hopefulness which youth can never resist, and seduced his thoughts away from all the harder problems of his life to dwell

upon the sweeter trouble of that doubt about Lucy,—was not the best means of getting on with his work. He sat thus leaning back—sometimes dipping his pen in the ink, and hovering over the paper for two or three seconds at a time, sometimes reading over the words, and making a faint effort to recall his own attention to them ; for, on the whole, perhaps, it is not of much use getting up very early in the morning when the chief consequence of it is, that a man feels he has an hour to spare, and a little time to play before he begins.

Mr Wentworth was still lingering in this peaceful pause, when he heard, in the stillness, hasty steps coming down Grange Lane. No doubt it was some workmen going to their work, and he felt it must be nearly six o'clock, and dipped his pen once more in the ink ; but, the next moment, paused again to listen, feeling in his heart a strange conviction that the steps would stop at his door, and that something was going to happen. He was sure of it, and yet somehow the sound tingled upon his heart when he heard the bell ring, waking up echoes in the silent house. Cook and Sarah had not yet given any signs of coming down-stairs, and nobody stirred even at the sound of the bell. Mr

Wentworth put down his pen altogether, and listened with an anxiety which he could scarcely account for—knowing, as he said to himself, that it must be the milk, or the baker, or somebody. But neither the milk nor the baker would have dared to knock, and shake, and kick the door as the new arrivals were doing. Mr Wentworth sat still as long as he could, then he added to the din they were making outside by an indignant ring of his own bell ; and, finally getting anxious, as was natural, and bethinking himself of his father's attack and Mr Wodehouse's illness, the Curate took the matter into his own hands, and hastened down-stairs to open the door. Mrs Hadwin called to him as he passed her room, thinking it was Sarah, and begging for goodness gracious sake to know directly what was the matter ; and he felt himself growing agitated as he drew back the complicated bolts, and turned the key in the door, which was elaborately defended, as was natural. When he hurried out into the garden, the songs of the birds and the morning air seemed to have changed their character. He thought he was about to be summoned to the deathbed of one or other of the old men upon whom their sons had brought such misery. He was but little

acquainted with the fastenings of the garden door, and fumbled a little over them in his anxiety. "Wait a moment and you shall be admitted," he called out to those outside, who still continued to knock ; and he fancied, even in the haste and confusion of the moment, that his voice caused some little commotion among them. Mr Wentworth opened the door, looking anxiously out for some boy with a telegram, or other such mournful messenger ; but to his utter amazement was nearly knocked down by the sudden plunge of Elsworthy, who entered with a spring like that of a wild animal, and whose face looked white and haggard as he rushed in. He came against the Curate so roughly as to drive him a step or two farther into the garden, and naturally aroused somewhat sharply the temper of the young man, who had already begun to regard him with disagreeable sensations as a kind of spy against himself.

"What in the world do you want at such an early hour in the morning ?" cried Mr Wentworth—"and what do you mean by making such a noise ? Is Mr Wodehouse worse ? or what has happened ?" for, to tell the truth, he was a little relieved to find that the two people outside both belonged to Carlingford, and that

nowhere was there any visible apparition of a telegraph boy.

"Don't trifle with me, Mr Wentworth," said Elsworthy. "I'm a poor man ; but a worm as is trodden upon turns. I want my child, sir ! —give me my child. I'll find her out if it was at the end of the world. I've only brought down my neighbour with me as I can trust," he continued hoarsely—"to save both your characters. I don't want to make no talk ; if you do what is right by Rosa, neither me nor him will ever say a word. I want Rosa, Mr Wentworth. Where's Rosa ? If I had known as it was for this you wanted her home ! But I'll take my oath not to make no talk," cried the clerk, with passion and earnestness, which confounded Mr Wentworth — "if you'll promise to do what's right by her, and let me take her home."

"Elsworthy, are you mad ?" cried the Curate — "is he out of his senses ? Has anything happened to Rosa ? For heaven's sake, Hayles, don't stand there like a man of wood, but tell me if the man's crazy, or what he means."

"I'll come in, sir, if you've no objection, and shut the door, not to make a talk," said Elsworthy's companion, Peter Hayles, the druggist. "If it can be managed without any gossip, it'll

be best for all parties," said this worthy, shutting the door softly after him. "The thing is, where's Rosa, Mr Wentworth? I can't think as you've got her here."

"She's all the same as my own child!" cried Elsworthy, who was greatly excited. "I've had her and loved her since she was a baby. I don't mean to say as I'd put myself forward to hurt her prospects if she was married in a superior line o' life; but them as harms Rosa has me to reckon with," he said, with a kind of fury which sat strangely on the man. "Mr Wentworth, where's the child? God forgive you both, you've given me a night o' weeping; but if you'll do what's right by Rosa, and send her home in the mean time——"

"Be silent, sir!" cried the Curate. "I know nothing in the world about Rosa. How dare you venture to come on such an errand to me? I don't understand how it is," said the young man, growing red and angry, "that you try so persistently to connect this child with me. I have never had anything to do with her, and I will not submit to any such impertinent suspicion. Leave my house, sir, immediately, and don't insult me by making such inquiries here."

Mr Wentworth was very angry in the first

flush of his wrath. He did not think what misery was involved in the question which had been addressed to him, nor did he see for the moment the terrible calamity to Rosa which was suggested by this search for her. He thought only of himself, as was natural, at the first shock—of the injurious and insulting suspicion with which he seemed to be pursued, and of the annoyance which she and her friends were causing him. “What do you mean by rousing a whole household at this hour in the morning?” cried Mr Wentworth, as he saw with vexation, Sarah, very startled and sleepy, come stealing round by the kitchen door.

“You don’t look as if you had wanted any rousing,” said Elsworthy, who was too much in earnest to own the Curate’s authority. “She was seen at your door the last thing last night, and you’re in your clothes, as bright as day, and a-waiting for us afore six o’clock in the morning. Do you think as I’ve shut my eyes because it’s my clergyman?” cried the injured man, passionately. “I want my little girl—my little Rosa—as is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. If Mr Wentworth didn’t know nothing about it, as he says,” cried Elsworthy, with sudden insight, “he has a feelin’ heart, and

he'd be grieved about the child ; but he ain't grieved, nor concerned, nor nothing in the world but angry ; and will you tell me there ain't nothing to be drawn from that ? But it's far from my intention to raise a talk," said the clerk, drawing closer and touching the arm of the Perpetual Curate ; "let her come back, and if you're a man of your word, and behave honourable by her, there shan't be nothing said in Carlingford. I'll stand up for you, sir, against the world."

Mr Wentworth shook off his assailant's hand with a mingled sense of exasperation and sympathy. "I tell you, upon my honour, I know nothing about her," he said. "But it is true enough I have been thinking only of myself," he continued, addressing the other. "How about the girl ? When was she lost ? and can't you think of any place she can have gone to ? Elsworthy, hear reason," cried the Curate, anxiously. "I assure you on my word, that I have never seen her since I closed this garden gate upon her last night."

"And I would ask you, sir, what had Rosa to do at your garden gate ?" cried the clerk of St Roque's. "He ain't denying it, Hayles ; you can see as he ain't a-denying of it. What was it

as she came here for but you ? Mr Wentworth, I've always had a great respect for you," said Elsworthy. "I've respected you as my clergyman, sir, as well as for other things ; but you're a young man, and human nature is frail. I say again as you needn't have no fear for me. I ain't one as likes to make a talk, and no more is Hayles. Give up the girl, and give me your promise, and there ain't a man living as will be the wiser ; Mr Wentworth——"

"Hold your tongue, sir !" cried the Curate, furious with indignation and resentment. "Leave this place instantly ! If you don't want me to pitch you into the middle of the road, hold your tongue and go away. The man is mad !" said Mr Wentworth, turning towards the spectator, Hayles, and pausing to take breath. But it was evident that this third person was by no means on the Curate's side.

"I don't know, sir, I'm sure," said Hayles, with a blank countenance. "It appears to me, sir, as it's an awkward business for all parties. Here's the girl gone, and no one knows where. When a girl don't come back to her own 'ome all night, things looks serious, sir ; and it has been said as the last place she was seen was at your door."

"Who says so?" cried Mr Wentworth.

"Well—it was—a party, sir—a highly respectable party—as I have good reason to believe," said Hayles, "being a constant customer—one as there's every confidence to be put in. It's better not to name no names, being at this period of the affair."

And at that moment, unluckily for Mr Wentworth, there suddenly floated across his mind the clearest recollection of the Miss Hemmings, and the look they gave him in passing. He felt a hot flush rush over his face as he recalled it. They, then, were his accusers in the first place ; and for the first time he began to realise how the tide of accusation would surge through Carlingford, and how circumstances would be patched together, and very plausible evidence concocted out of the few facts which were capable of an inference totally opposed to the truth. The blood rushed to his face in an overpowering glow, and then he felt the warm tide going back upon his heart, and realised the position in which he stood for the first time in its true light.

"And if you'll let me say it, sir," said the judicious Hayles, "though a man may be in a bit of a passion, and speak more strong than is

called for, it ain't unnatural in the circumstances ; things may be better than they appear," said the druggist, mildly ; " I don't say nothing against that ; it may be as you've took her away, sir (if so be as you have took her away), for to give her a bit of education, or such-like, before making her your wife ; but folks in general ain't expected to know that ; and when a young girl is kep' out of her 'ome for a whole night, it ain't wonderful if her friends take fright. It's a sad thing for Rosa whoever's taken her away, and wherever she is."

Now, Mr Wentworth, notwithstanding the indignant state of mind which he was in, was emphatically of the tolerant temper which is so curiously characteristic of his generation. He could not be unreasonable even in his own cause ; he was not partisan enough, even in his own behalf, to forget that there was another side to the question, nor to see how hard and how sad was that other side. He was moved in spite of himself to grieve over Rosa Elsworthy's great misfortune.

" Poor little deluded child," he said sadly ; " I acknowledge it is very dreadful for her and for her friends. I can excuse a man who is mad with grief and wretchedness and anxiety, and

doesn't know what he is saying. As for any man in his senses imagining," said the Curate again, with a flush of sudden colour, "that I could possibly be concerned in anything so base, that is simply absurd. When Elsworthy returns to reason, and acknowledges the folly of what he has said, I will do anything in the world to help him. It is unnecessary for you to wait," said Mr Wentworth, turning to Sarah, who had stolen up behind, and caught some of the conversation, and who was staring with round eyes of wonder, partly guessing, partly inquiring, what had happened—"these people want me; go in-doors and never mind."

"La, sir! Missis is a-ringing all the bells down to know what 'as 'appened," said Sarah, holding her ground.

This was how it was to be—the name of the Curate of St Roque's was to be linked to that of Rosa Elsworthy, let the truth be what it might, in the mouths of every maid and every mistress in Carlingford. He was seized with a sudden apprehension of this aspect of the matter, and it was not wonderful if Mr Wentworth drew his breath hard and set his teeth, as he ordered the woman away, in a tone which could not be disobeyed.

"I don't want to make no talk," said Elsworthy, who during this time had made many efforts to speak ; "I've said it before, and I say it again—it's Mr Wentworth's fault if there's any talk. She was seen here last night," he went on rapidly, "and afore six o'clock this blessed morning, you, as are never known to be stirring early, meets us at the door, all shaved and dressed ; and it ain't very difficult to see, to them as watches the clergyman's countenance," said Elsworthy, turning from one to another, "as everything isn't as straight as it ought to be; but I ain't going to make no talk, Mr Wentworth," he went on, drawing closer, and speaking with conciliatory softness ; "me and her aunt, sir, loves her dearly, but we're not the folks to stand in her way, if a gentleman was to take a fancy to Rosa. If you'll give me your word to make her your wife honourable, and tell me where she is, tortures wouldn't draw no complaints from me. One moment, sir; it ain't only that she's pretty, but she's good as well—she won't do you no discredit, Mr Wentworth. Put her to school, or what you please, sir," said Rosa's uncle ; "me and my wife will never interfere, so be as you make her your wife honourable; but I ain't a worm to be trampled on,"

cried Elsworthy, as the Curate, finding him approach very closely, thrust him away with vehement indignation ; “ I ain’t a slave to be pushed about. Them as brings Rosa to shame shall come to shame by me ; I’ll ruin the man as ruins that child. You may turn me out,” he cried, as the Curate laid his powerful hand upon his shoulder, and forced him towards the door, “ but I’ll come back, and I’ll bring all Carlingford. There shan’t be a soul in the town as doesn’t know. Oh, you young viper, as I thought was a pious clergyman ! you may turn me out, but you ain’t got rid of me. My child—where’s my child ? ” cried the infuriated clerk, as he found himself ejected into the road outside, and the door suddenly closed upon him. He turned round to beat upon it in blind fury, and kept calling upon Rosa, and wasting his threats and arguments upon the calm air outside. Some of the maid-servants in the other houses came out, broom in hand, to the green doors, to see what was the matter, but they were not near enough to hear distinctly, and no early wayfarers had as yet invaded the morning quiet of Grange Lane.

Mr Wentworth, white with excitement, and terribly calm and self-possessed, turned to the

amazed and trembling druggist, who still stood inside. "Look here, Hayles," said the Curate ; "I have never seen Rosa Elsworthy since I closed this door upon her last night. What had brought her here I don't know—at least she came with no intention of seeing me—and I reproved her sharply for being out so late. This is all I know about the affair, and all I intend to say to any one. If that idiot outside intends to make a disturbance, he must do it ; I shall take no further trouble to clear myself of such an insane accusation. I think it right to say as much to you, because you seem to have your senses about you," said the Curate, pausing, out of breath. He was perfectly calm, but it was impossible to ignore the effect of such a scene upon ordinary flesh and blood. His heart was beating loudly, and his breath came short and quick. He turned away and walked up to the house-door, and then came back again. "You understand me, I suppose ?" he said ; "and if Elsworthy is not mad, you had better suggest to him not to lose his only chance of recovering Rosa by this vain bluster to me, who know nothing about her. I shan't be idle in the mean time," said Mr Wentworth. All this time Elsworthy was beating against the door, and shouting his threats into

the quiet of the morning; and Mrs Hadwin had thrown up her window, and stood there visibly in her nightcap, trying to find out what the noise was about, and trembling for the respectability of her house—all which the Curate apprehended with that extraordinary swiftness and breadth of perception which comes to men at the eventful moments of life.

“I’ll do my best, sir,” said Hayles, who felt that his honour was appealed to ; “but it’s an awkward business for all parties, that’s what it is ;” and the druggist backed out in a state of great bewilderment, having a little struggle at the door with Elsworthy to prevent his re-entrance. “There ain’t nothing to be got out of *him*,” said Mr Hayles, as he succeeded at last in leading his friend away. Such was the conclusion of Mr Wentworth’s morning studies, and the sermon which was to have been half written before breakfast upon that eventful Saturday. He went back to the house, as was natural, with very different thoughts in his mind.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE first thing Mr Wentworth did was to hasten up-stairs to Wodehouse's room. Sarah had gone before him, and was by this time talking to her mistress, who had left the window, and stood, still in her nightcap, at the door of her own chamber. "It's something about Rosa Elsworthy, ma'am," said Sarah; "she's gone off with some one, which nothing else was to be expected; and her uncle's been a-raving and a-raging at Mr Wentworth, which proves as a gentleman should never take no notice of them shop-girls. I always heard as she was a bad lot."

"Oh, Mr Wentworth—if you would excuse my nightcap," said Mrs Hadwin—"I am so shaken and all of a tremble with that noise; I couldn't help thinking it must be a murder at the least," said the little old lady; "but I never could be-

lieve that there was anything between you and—— Sarah, you may go away; I should like to talk to Mr Wentworth by himself," said Mrs Hadwin, suddenly remembering that Mr Wentworth's character must not be discussed in the presence of even her favourite maid.

"Presently," said the unhappy Curate, with mingled impatience and resignation; and, after a hasty knock at the door, he went into Wodehouse's room, which was opposite, so full of a furious anxiety to question him that he had burst into speech before he perceived that the room was empty. "Answer me this instant," he had cried, "where is Rosa Elsworthy?" and then he paused, utterly taken aback. It had not occurred to him that the culprit would be gone. He had parted with him late on the previous night, leaving him, according to appearances, in a state of sulky half-penitence; and now the first impulse of his consternation was to look in all the corners for the fugitive. The room had evidently been occupied that night; part of the Curate's own wardrobe, which he had bestowed upon his guest, lay about on the chairs, and on a little table were his tools and the bits of wood with which he did his carving. The window was open, letting in the fresh air,

and altogether the apartment looked so exactly like what it might have done had the occupant gone out for a virtuous morning walk, that Mr Wentworth stopped short in blank amazement. It was a relief to him to hear the curious Sarah still rustling in the passage outside. He came out upon her so hastily that Sarah was startled. Perhaps she had been so far excited out of her usual propriety as to think of the keyhole as a medium of information.

“Where is Wode——Mr Smith?” cried the Curate; “he is not in his room—he does not generally get up so early. Where is he? Did he go out last night?”

“Not as I knows of, sir,” said Sarah, who grew a little pale, and gave a second glance at the open door. “Isn’t the gentleman in his room? He do take a walk in the morning, now and again,” and Sarah cast an alarmed look behind to see if her mistress was still within hearing; but Mrs Hadwin, intent upon questioning Mr Wentworth himself, had fortunately retired to put on her cap, and closed her door.

“Where is he?” said the Curate, firmly.

“Oh, please, sir, I don’t know,” said Sarah, who was very near crying. “He’s gone out for a walk, that’s all. Oh, Mr Wentworth, don’t

look at me so dreadful, and I'll tell you hall," cried the frightened girl, "*hall*—as true as if I was on my oath. He 'as a taking way with him," said poor Sarah, to whom the sulky and shabby rascal was radiant still with the fascinating though faded glory of "a gentleman"—"and he ain't one as has been used to regular hours ; and seeing as he was a friend of yours, I knew as hall was safe, Mr Wentworth ; and oh, sir, if you'll not tell missis, as might be angry. I didn't mean no harm ; and knowing as he was a friend of yours, I let him have the key of the little door."

Here Sarah put her apron to her eyes ; she did not cry much into it, or wet it with her tears—but under its cover she peeped at Mr Wentworth, and, encouraged by his looks, which did not seem to promise any immediate catastrophe, went on with her explanation.

"He's been and took a walk often in the morning," said Sarah, with little gasps which interrupted her voice, "and come in as steady as steady, and nothing happened. He's gone for a walk now, poor gentleman. Them as goes out first thing in the morning, can't mean no harm, Mr Wentworth. If it was at night, it would be different," said the apologetic Sarah.

"He'll be in afore we've done our breakfast in the kitchen ; that's his hour, for I always brings him a cup of coffee. If you hadn't been up not till *your* hour, sir, you'd never have known nothing about it ;" and here even Mrs Hadwin's housemaid looked sharply in the Curate's face. "I never knew you so early, sir, not since I've been here," said Sarah ; and though she was a partisan of Mr Wentworth, it occurred even to Sarah that perhaps, after all, Elsworthy might be right.

"If he comes in let me know immediately," said the Curate ; and he went to his study and shut himself in, to think it all over with a sense of being baited and baffled on every side. As for Sarah, she went off in great excitement to discuss the whole business with the cook, tossing her head as she went. "Rosa Elsworthy, indeed !" said Sarah to herself, thinking her own claims to admiration quite as well worth considering—and Mr Wentworth had already lost one humble follower in Grange Lane.

The Curate sat down at his table as before, and gazed with a kind of exasperation at the paper and the text out of which his sermon was to have come. "When the wicked man turneth away from the evil of his ways"—he began to

wonder bitterly whether that ever happened, or if it was any good trying to bring it about. If it were really the case that Wodehouse, whom he had been labouring to save from the consequences of one crime, had, at the very crisis of his fate, perpetrated another of the basest kind, what was the good of wasting strength in behalf of a wretch so abandoned ? Why should such a man be permitted to live to bring shame and misery on everybody connected with him ? and why, when noxious vermin of every other description were hunted down and exterminated, should the vile human creature be spared to suck the blood of his friends ? Mr Wentworth grew sanguinary in his thoughts as he leaned back in his chair, and tried to return to the train of reflection which Elsworthy's arrival had banished. That was totally impossible, but another train of ideas came fast enough to fill up the vacant space. The Curate saw himself hemmed in on every side without any way of escape. If he could not extract any information from Wodehouse, or if Wodehouse denied any knowledge of Rosa, what could he do to clear himself from an imputation so terrible ? and if, on the other hand, Wodehouse did not come back, and so pleaded guilty, how could he

pursue and put the law upon the track of the man whom he had just been labouring to save from justice, and over whose head a criminal prosecution was impending ? Mr Wentworth saw nothing but misery, let him turn where he would—nothing but disgrace, misapprehension, unjust blame. He divined, with the instinct of a man in deadly peril, that Elsworthy, who was a mean enough man in common circumstances, had been inspired by the supposed injury he had sustained into a relentless demon ; and he saw distinctly how strong the chain of evidence was against him, and how little he could do to clear himself. As his miseries grew upon him, he got up, as was natural, and began to walk about the room to walk down his impatience, if he could, and acquire sufficient composure to enable him to wait for the time when Wodehouse might be expected to arrive. Mr Wentworth had forgotten at the moment that Mrs Hadwin's room was next to his study, and that, as she stood putting on her cap, his footsteps vibrated along the flooring, which thrilled under her feet almost as much as under his own. Mrs Hadwin, as she stood before her glass smoothing her thin little braids of white hair, and putting on her cap, could not but wonder to

herself what could make Mr Wentworth walk about the room in such an agitated way. It was not by any means the custom of the Perpetual Curate, who, up to the time of his aunts' arrival in Carlingford, had known no special disturbances in his individual career. And then the old lady thought of that report about little Rosa Elsworthy, which she had never believed, and grew troubled, as old ladies are not unapt to do under such circumstances, with all that lively faith in the seductions of "an artful girl," and all that contemptuous pity for a "poor young man," which seems to come natural to a woman. All the old ladies in Carlingford, male and female, were but too likely to entertain the same sentiments, which at least, if they did nothing else, showed a wonderful faith in the power of love and folly common to human nature. It did not occur to Mrs Hadwin any more than it did to Miss Dora, that Mr Wentworth's good sense and pride, and superior cultivation, were sufficient defences against little Rosa's dimpled cheeks and bright eyes; and with some few exceptions, such was likely to be the opinion of the little world of Carlingford. Mrs Hadwin grew more and more anxious about the business as she felt the boards thrill

under her feet, and heard the impatient movements in the next room ; and as soon as she had settled her cap to her satisfaction, she left her own chamber and went to knock, as was to be expected, at Mr Wentworth's door.

It was just at this moment that Mr Wentworth saw Wodehouse's shabby figure entering at the garden gate ; he turned round suddenly without hearing Mrs Hadwin's knock, and all but ran over the old lady in his haste and eagerness—"Pardon me ; I am in a great hurry," cried the Curate, darting past her. Just at the moment when she expected her curiosity to be satisfied, it was rather hard upon Mrs Hadwin to be dismissed so summarily. She went down-stairs in a state of great dignity, with her lace mittens on, and her hands crossed before her. She felt she had more and more reason for doubting human nature in general, and for believing that the Curate of St Roque's in particular could not bear any close examination into his conduct. Mrs Hadwin sat down to her breakfast accordingly with a sense of pitying virtue which was sweet to her spirit, notwithstanding that she was, as she would have frankly acknowledged, very fond of Mr Wentworth ; she said, "Poor young man," to herself, and

shook her head over him as she poured out her solitary cup of tea. She had never been a beauty herself, nor had she exercised any overwhelming influence that she could remember over any one in the days of her distant youth : but being a true woman, Mrs Hadwin believed in Rosa Elsworthy, and pitied, not without a certain half-conscious female disdain, the weakness of the inevitable victim. He did not dare to stop to explain to *her* what it meant. He rushed out of her way as soon as he saw she meant to question him. That designing girl had got him entirely under her sway, the poor young man !

Meanwhile the Curate, without a single thought for his landlady, made a rush to Wodehouse's room. He did not wait for any answer to his knock, but went in, not as a matter of policy, but because his eagerness carried him on in spite of himself. To Mr Wentworth's great amazement Wodehouse was undressing, intending, apparently, to return to bed. The shabby fugitive, looking broad and brawny in his shirt-sleeves, turned round when he heard the voice with an angry exclamation. His face grew black as he saw the Curate at the door. "What the deuce have you to do in my room at this

hour?" he growled into his beard. "Is a man never to have a little peace?" and with that threw down his coat, which he still had in his hand, and faced round towards the intruder with sullen looks. It was his nature to stand always on the defensive, and he had got so much accustomed to being regarded as a culprit, that he naturally took up the part, whether there might be just occasion or not.

"Where have you been?" exclaimed the Curate; "answer me truly—I can't submit to any evasion. I know it all, Wodehouse. Where is she? where have you hid her? If you do not give her up, I must give you up to justice. Do you hear me? where is Rosa Elsworthy? This is a matter that touches my honour, and I must know the truth."

Mr Wentworth was so full of the subject that it did not occur to him how much time he was giving his antagonist to prepare his answer. Though Wodehouse was not clever, he had the instinct of a baited animal driven to bay; and resistance and denial came natural to a man who had been accused and condemned all his life.

"Rosa Elsworthy?" said the vagabond, "what have I to do with Rosa Elsworthy? A pretty

man I should be to run away with a girl ; all that I have in the world is a shilling or two, and, by Jove, it's an expensive business, that is. You should ask your brother," he continued, giving a furtive glance at the Curate—"it's more in his way, by Jove, than mine."

Mr Wentworth was recalled to himself by this reply. "Where is she ?" he said, sternly,— "no trifling. I did not ask if you had taken her away. I ask, where is she ?" He had shut the door behind him, and stood in the middle of the room, facing Wodehouse, and overawing him by his superior stature, force, and virtue. Before the Curate's look the eyes of the other fell ; but he had fallen by chance on a reasonable defence enough, and so long as he held by that felt himself tolerably safe.

"I don't know anything about her," he repeated ; "how should I know anything about her ? I ain't a fool, by Jove, whatever I may be : a man may talk to a pretty girl without any harm. I mayn't be as good as a parson, but, by Jove, I ain't a fool," he muttered through his beard. He had begun to speak with a kind of sulky self-confidence ; but his voice sank lower as he proceeded. Jack Wentworth's elegant levity was a terrible failure in the hands

of the coarser rascal. He fell back by degrees upon the only natural quality which enabled him to offer any resistance. "By Jove, I ain't an idiot," he repeated with dull obstinacy, and upon that statement made a stand in his dogged, argumentative way.

"Would you like it better if I said you were a villain?" asked the exasperated Curate. "I don't want to discuss your character with you. Where is Rosa Elsworthy? She is scarcely more than a child," said Mr Wentworth, "and a fool, if you like. But where is she? I warn you that unless you tell me you shall have no more assistance from me."

"And I tell you that I don't know," said Wodehouse; and the two men stood facing each other, one glowing with youthful indignation, the other enveloped in a cloud of sullen resistance. Just then there came a soft knock at the door, and Sarah peeped in with a coquettish air, which at no other time in her existence had been visible in the sedate demeanour of Mrs Hadwin's favourite handmaid. The stranger lodger was "a gentleman," notwithstanding his shabbiness, and he was a very civil-spoken gentleman, without a bit of pride; and Sarah was still a woman, though she was plain and a

housemaid. "Please, sir, I've brought you your coffee," said Sarah, and she carried in her tray, which contained all the materials for a plentiful breakfast. When she saw Mr Wentworth standing in the room, and Wodehouse in his shirt-sleeves, Sarah said, "La!" and set down her tray hastily and vanished; but the episode, short as it was, had not been without its use to the culprit who was standing on his defence.

"I'm not staying here on my own account," said Wodehouse,—"it's no pleasure to me to be here. I'm staying for your brother's sake and—other people's; it's no pleasure to me, by Jove! I'd go to-morrow if I had my way—but I ain't a fool," continued the sulky defendant: "it's of no use asking me such questions. By Jove, I've other things to think of than girls; and you know pretty well how much money I've got," he continued, taking out an old purse and emptying out the few shillings it contained into his hand. When he had thrown them about, out and in, for nearly a minute, he turned once more upon the Curate. "I'd like to have a little more pocket-money before I ran away with any one," said Wodehouse, and tossed the shillings back contemptuously. As for Mr Wentworth,

his reasonableness once more came greatly in his way. He began to ask himself whether this penniless vagabond, who seemed to have no dash or daring in his character, could have been the man to carry little Rosa away; and, perplexed by this idea, Mr Wentworth put himself unawares into the position of his opponent, and in that character made an appeal to his imaginary generosity and truth.

"Wodehouse," he said seriously, "look here. I am likely to be much annoyed about this, and perhaps injured. I entreat you to tell me, if you know, where the girl is? I've been at some little trouble for you; be frank with me for once," said the Curate of St Roque's. Nothing in existence could have prevented himself from responding to such an appeal, and he made it with a kind of absurd confidence that there must be some kindred depths even in the meaner nature with which he had to deal, which would have been to Jack Wentworth, had he seen it, a source of inextinguishable laughter. Even Wodehouse was taken by surprise. He did not understand Mr Wentworth, but a certain vague idea that the Curate was addressing him as if he still were "a gentleman as he used to be"—though it did not alter his resolution in any

way—brought a vague flush of shame to his unaccustomed cheek.

“I ain’t a fool,” he repeated rather hastily, and turned away not to meet the Curate’s eyes. “I’ve got no money—how should *I* know anything about her? If I had, do you think I should have been here?” he continued, with a sidelong look of inquiry: then he paused and put on his coat, and in that garb felt himself more of a match for his opponent. “I’ll tell you one thing you’ll thank me for,” he said,—“the old man is dying, they think. They’ll be sending for you presently. That’s more important than a talk about a girl. I’ve been talked to till I’m sick,” said Wodehouse, with a little burst of irrepressible nature, “but things may change before you all know where you are.” When he had said so much, the fear in his heart awoke again, and he cast another look of inquiry and anxiety at the Curate’s face. But Mr Wentworth was disgusted, and had no more to say.

“Everything changes—except the heart of the churl, which can never be made bountiful,” said the indignant young priest. It was not a fit sentiment, perhaps, for a preacher who had just written that text about the wicked man

turning from the evil of his ways. Mr Wentworth went away in a glow of indignation and excitement, and left his guest to Sarah's bountiful provision of hot coffee and new-laid eggs, to which Wodehouse addressed himself with a perfectly good appetite, notwithstanding all the events of the morning, and all the mystery of the night.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MR WENTWORTH retired to his own quarters with enough to think about for one morning. He could not make up his mind about Wodehouse—whether he was guilty or not guilty. It seemed incredible that, penniless as he was, he could have succeeded in carrying off a girl so well known in Carlingford as Rosa Elsworthy ; and, if he had taken her away, how did it happen that he himself had come back again ? The Curate saw clearly enough that his only chance for exculpating himself in the sight of the multitude was by bringing home the guilt to somebody else ; and in proportion to the utter scorn with which he had treated Elsworthy's insinuations at first, was his serious apprehension now of the danger which surrounded him. He divined all that slander would make of it with the quickened intelligence of a man whose en-

tire life, and reputation dearer than life, were at stake. If it could not be cleared up—if even any investigation which he might be able to demand was not perfectly successful—Mr Wentworth was quite well aware that the character of a clergyman was almost as susceptible as that of a woman, and that the vague stigma might haunt and overshadow him all his life. The thought was overwhelming at this moment, when his first hopes of finding a speedy solution of the mystery had come to nothing. If he had but lived a century earlier, the chances are that no doubt of Wodehouse's guilt would have entered his mind ; but Mr Wentworth was a man of the present age—reasonable to a fault, and apt to consider other people as much as possible from their own point of view. He did not see, looking at all the circumstances, how Wodehouse *could* be guilty; and the Curate would not permit the strong instinctive certainty that he *was* guilty, to move his own mind from what he imagined to be its better judgment. He was thinking it over very gloomily when his breakfast was brought to him and his letters, feeling that he could be sure of nobody in such an emergency, and dreading more the doubt of his friends than the clamour of the general world.

He could bear (he imagined) to be hooted at in the streets, if it ever came to that ; but to see the faces of those who loved him troubled with a torturing doubt of his truth was a terrible thought to the Perpetual Curate. And Lucy? But here the young man got up indignant, and threw off his fears. He doubted her regard with a doubt which threw darkness over the whole universe ; but that she should be able for a moment to doubt his entire devotion to her, seemed a blindness incredible. No ; let who would believe ill of him in this respect, to Lucy such an accusation must look as monstrous as it was untrue. *She*, at least, knew otherwise ; and, taking this false comfort to his heart, Mr Wentworth took up his letters, and presently was deep in the anxieties of his brother Gerald, who wrote to him as to a man at leisure, and without any overwhelming perplexities of his own. It requires a very high amount of unselfishness in the person thus addressed to prevent a degree of irritation which is much opposed to sympathy ; and Mr Wentworth, though he was very impartial and reasonable, was not, being still young and meaning to be happy, unselfish to any inhuman degree. He put down Gerald's letter, after he had read through half of it, with

an exclamation of impatience which he could not restrain, and then poured out his coffee, which had got cold in the mean time, and gulped it down with a sense of half-comforting disgust—for there are moments when the mortification of the flesh is a relief to the spirit ; and then it occurred to him to remember Wodehouse's tray, which was a kind of love-offering to the shabby vagabond, and the perfect good order in which *he* had his breakfast ; and Mr Wentworth laughed at himself with a whimsical perception of all that was absurd in his own position which did him good, and broke the spell of his solitary musings. When he took up Gerald's letter again, he read it through. A man more sympathetic, open-hearted, and unselfish than Gerald Wentworth did not exist in the world, as his brother well knew ; but nevertheless, Gerald's mind was so entirely preoccupied that he passed over the Curate's cares with the lightest reference imaginable. “I hope you found all right when you got back, and nothing seriously amiss with Jack,” the elder brother wrote, and then went on to his own affairs. All right ! nothing seriously amiss ! To a man who felt himself standing on the edge of possible ruin, such expressions seemed strange indeed.

The Rector of Wentworth, however, had enough in his mind to excuse him for a momentary forgetfulness of others. Things had taken a different turn with him since his brother left. He had been so busy with his change of faith and sentiment, that the practical possibilities of the step which he contemplated had not disturbed Gerald. He had taken it calmly for granted that he *could* do what he wanted to do. But a new light had burst upon him in that respect, and changed the character of his thoughts. Notwithstanding the conviction into which he had reasoned himself, that peace was to be found in Rome and nowhere else, the Rector of Wentworth had not contemplated the idea of becoming simply a Catholic layman. He was nothing if not a priest, he had said, passionately. He could have made a martyr of himself—have suffered tortures and deaths with the steadiest endurance; but he could not face the idea of taking all meaning and significance out of his life, by giving up the profession which he felt to be laid upon him by orders indelible, beyond the power of circumstances to revoke. Such was the new complication to which Gerald had come. He was terribly staggered in his previous resolution by this new doubt, and he

wrote to pour his difficulties into the ear of his brother. It had been Frank's question which first awoke in his mind a doubt as to the practicability of the step he contemplated ; and one of Louisa's relations, appealed to by her in her next access of terror, had brought this aspect of the matter still more distinctly before the Rector of Wentworth. Gerald had been studying Canon law, but his English intelligence did not make very much of it ; and the bare idea of a dispensation making that right which in itself was wrong, touched the high-minded gentleman to the quick, and brought him to a sudden standstill. He who was nothing if not a priest, stood sorrowfully looking at his contemplated martyrdom—like Brother Domenico of St Mark's sighing on the edge of the fiery ordeal into which the Church herself would not let him plunge. If it was so, he no longer knew what to do. He would have wrapped the vestment of the new priesthood about him, though it was a garment of fire ; but to stand aside in irksome leisure was a harder trial, at which he trembled. This was the new complication in which Gerald asked his brother's sympathy and counsel. It was a long letter, curiously introspective, and full of self-argu-

ment ; and it was hard work, with a mind so occupied as was that of the Perpetual Curate, to give it due attention. He put it away when he had done with his cold breakfast, and deferred the consideration of the subject, with a kind of vague hope that the family firmament might possibly brighten in that quarter at least ; but the far-off and indistinct interest with which he viewed, across his own gloomy surroundings, this matter which had engrossed him so completely a few days before, was wonderful to see.

And then he paused to think what he was to do. To go out and face the slander which already must have crept forth on its way—to see Elsworthy and ascertain whether he had come to his senses, and try if anything could be done for Rosa's discovery—to exert himself somehow, in short, and get rid of the feverish activity which he felt consuming him—that was what he longed to do. But, on the other hand, it was Saturday, and Mr Wentworth was conscious that it would be more dignified, and in better taste altogether, if he went on writing his sermon and took no notice of this occurrence, with which, in reality, he had nothing to do. It was difficult, but no doubt it was best; and he tried it accordingly— putting down a great many sentences

which had to be scratched out again, and spoiling altogether the appearance of his sermon-paper. When a message came from Mr Wodehouse's about eleven o'clock, bringing the news that he was much worse and not expected to live, and begging Mr Wentworth's immediate presence, the Curate was as nearly glad as it was possible for a man to be under the circumstances. He had "a feeling heart," as even Elsworthy allowed, but in such a moment of excitement any kind of great and terrible event seemed to come natural. He hastened out into the fresh morning sunshine, which still seemed thrilling with life and joy, and went up Grange Lane with a certain sense of curiosity, wondering whether everybody was already aware of what had happened. A long way off a figure which much resembled that of the Rector was visible crossing over to Dr Marjoribanks's door; and it occurred to the Curate that Mr Morgan was crossing to avoid him, which brought a smile of anger and involuntary dislike to his face, and nerved him for any other encounter. The green door at Mr Wodehouse's—a homely sign of the trouble in the house—had been left unlatched, and was swinging ajar with the wind when the Curate came up; and as he went in (closing it carefully after him,

for that forlorn little touch of carelessness went to his heart), he encountered in the garden Dr Marjoribanks and Dr Rider, who were coming out together with very grave looks. They did not stop for much conversation, only pausing to tell him that the case was hopeless, and that the patient could not possibly live beyond a day or two at most ; but even in the few words that were spoken Mr Wentworth perceived, or thought he perceived, that something had occurred to lessen him in the esteem of the shrewd old Scotch doctor, who contemplated him and his prayer-book with critical eyes. "I confess, after all, that there are cases in which written prayers are a kind of security," Dr Marjoribanks said in an irrelevant manner to Dr Rider when Mr Wentworth had passed them—an observation at which, in ordinary cases, the Curate would have smiled ; but to-day the colour rose to his face, and he understood that Dr Marjoribanks did not think him qualified to carry comfort or instruction to a sick-bed. Perhaps the old doctor had no such idea in his mind—perhaps it was simply a relic of his national Presbyterianism, to which the old Scotchman kept up a kind of visionary allegiance. But whether he meant it or not, Mr Wentworth understood it as a reproach to him-

self, and went on with a bitter feeling of mortification to the sick-room. He had gone with his whole heart into his priestly office, and had been noted for his ministrations to the sick and poor; but now his feelings were much too personal for the atmosphere into which he was just about to enter. He stopped at the door to tell John that he would take a stroll round the garden before he came in, as he had a headache, and went on through the walks which were sacred to Lucy, not thinking of her, but wondering bitterly whether anybody would stand by him, or whether an utterly baseless slander would outweigh all the five years of his life which he had spent among the people of Carlingford. Meanwhile John stood at the door and watched him, and of course thought it was very "queer." "It ain't as if he'd a-been sitting up all night, like our young ladies," said John to himself, and unconsciously noted the circumstance down in his memory against the Curate.

When Mr Wentworth entered the sick-room, he found all very silent and still in that darkened chamber. Lucy was seated by the bedside, wrapped in a loose dressing-gown, and looking as if she had not slept for several nights; while Miss Wodehouse, who, notwithstanding

standing all her anxiety to be of use, was far more helpless than Lucy, stood on the side next the door, with her eyes fixed on her sister, watching with pathetic unserviceableness for the moment when she could be of some use. As for the patient himself, he lay in a kind of stupor, from which he scarcely ever could be roused, and showed no tokens at the moment of hearing or seeing anybody. The scene was doubly sad, but it was without the excitement which so often breathes in the atmosphere of death. There was no eager listening for the last word, no last outbreaks of tenderness. The daughters were both hushed into utter silence ; and Lucy, who was more reasonable than her sister, had even given up those wistful beseeching looks at the patient, with which Miss Wodehouse still regarded him, as if perhaps he might be thus persuaded to speak. The nurse whom Dr Marjoribanks had sent to assist them was visible through an open door, sleeping very comfortably in the adjoining room. Mr Wentworth came into the silent chamber with all his anxieties throbbing in his heart, bringing life at its very height of agitation and tumult into the presence of death. He went forward to the bed, and tried for an instant to call up any

spark of intelligence that might yet exist within the mind of the dying man ; but Mr Wodehouse was beyond the voice of any priest. The Curate said the prayers for the dying at the bedside, suddenly filled with a great pity for the man who was thus taking leave unawares of all this mournful-splendid world. Though the young man knew many an ordinary sentiment about the vanity of life, and had given utterance to that effect freely in the way of his duty, he was still too fresh in his heart to conceive actually that any one could leave the world without poignant regrets ; and when his prayer was finished, he stood looking at the patient with inexpressible compassion. Mr Wodehouse had scarcely reached old age ; he was well-off, and only a week ago seemed to have so much to enjoy ; now, here he lay stupefied, on the edge of the grave, unable to respond even by a look to the love that surrounded him. Once more there rose in the heart of the young priest a natural impulse of resentment and indignation ; and when he thought of the cause of this change, he remembered Wodehouse's threat, and roused himself from his contemplation of the dying to think of the probable fate of those who must live.

"Has he made his will?" said Mr Wentworth, suddenly. He forgot that it was Lucy who was standing by him; and it was only when he caught a glance of reproach and horror from her eyes that he recollect ed how abrupt his question was. "Pardon me," he said; "you think me heartless to speak of it at such a time; but tell me, if you know: Miss Wodehouse, has he made his will?"

"Oh, Mr Wentworth, I don't know anything about business," said the elder sister. "He said he would; but we have had other things to think of—more important things," said poor Miss Wodehouse, wringing her hands, and looking at Mr. Wentworth with eyes full of warning and meaning, beseeching him not to betray her secret. She came nearer to the side of the bed on which Lucy and the Curate were standing, and plucked at his sleeve in her anxiety. "We have had very different things to think of. Oh, Mr Wentworth, what does it matter?" said the poor lady, interposing her anxious looks, which suggested every kind of misfortune, between the two.

"It matters everything in the world," said Mr Wentworth. "Pardon me if I wound you—I must speak; if it is possible to rouse him, an effort must be made. Send for Mr Waters.

He must not be allowed to go out of the world
and leave your interests in the hands of——”

“Oh, hush, Mr Wentworth, hush!—oh, hush,
hush! Don’t say any more,” cried Miss Wode-
house, grasping his arm in her terror.

Lucy rose from where she had been sitting at
the bedside. She had grown paler than before,
and looked almost stern in her youthful gravity.
“I will not permit my father to be disturbed,”
she said. “I don’t know what you mean, or
what you are talking of; but he is not to be
disturbed. Do you think I will let him be
vexed in his last hours about money or any-
body’s interest?” she said, turning upon the
Curate a momentary glance of scorn. Then she
sat down again, with a pang of disappointment
added to her grief. She could not keep her
heart so much apart from him, as not to expect
a little comfort from his presence. And there
had been comfort in his prayers and his looks;
but to hear him speak of wills and worldly
affairs by her father’s deathbed, as any other
man might have done, went to Lucy’s heart.
She sat down again, putting her hand softly
upon the edge of the pillow, to guard the peace
of those last moments which were ebbing away
so rapidly. What if all the comfort in the

world hung upon it? Could she let her kind father be troubled in his end for anything so miserable? Lucy turned her indignant eyes upon the others with silent resolution. It was she who was *his* protector now.

"But it must be done," said Mr Wentworth. "You will understand me hereafter. Miss Wodehouse, you must send for Mr Waters, and in the mean time I will do what I can to rouse him. It is no such cruelty as you think," said the Curate, with humility; "it is not for money or interest only—it concerns all the comfort of your life."

This he said to Lucy, who sat defending her father. She, for her part, looked up at him with eyes that broke his heart. At that moment of all others, the unfortunate Curate perceived, by a sudden flash of insight, that nothing less than love could look at him with such force of disappointment and reproach and wounded feeling. He replied to the look by a gesture of mingled entreaty and despair.

"What can I do?" he cried—"you have no one else to care for you. I cannot even explain to you all that is at stake. I must act as I ought, even though you hate me for it. Let us send for Mr Waters;—if there is a will——"

Mr Wentworth had raised his voice a little in the excitement of the moment, and the word caught the dull ear of the dying man. The Curate saw instantly that there was comprehension in the flicker of the eyelash and the tremulous movement of the hand upon the bed. It was a new and unaccustomed part which he had now to play; he went hurriedly to the other side and leaned over the pillow to make out the stammering words which began to be audible. Lucy had risen up also and stood looking at her father still with her look of defence. As the feeble lips babbled forth unintelligible words, Lucy's pale face grew sterner and sterner. As for Miss Wodehouse, she stood behind, crying and trembling. "Oh, Mr Wentworth, do you think it is returning life—do you think he is better?" she cried, looking wistfully at the Curate; and between the two young people, who were leaning with looks and feelings so different over his bed, the patient lay struggling with those terrible bonds of weakness, labouring to find expression for something which wrought him into a fever of excitement. While Mr Wentworth bent his ear closer and closer, trying to make some sense of the inarticulate torrent of sound, Lucy, inspired by

grief and horror and indignation, leaned over her father on the other side, doing everything possible to calm him. "Oh, papa, don't say any more—don't say any more ; we understand you," she cried, and put her soft hands upon his flushed forehead, and her cheek to his. "No more, no more !" cried the girl in the dulled ear which could not hear. "We will do everything you wish—we understand all," said Lucy. Mr Wentworth withdrew vanquished in that strange struggle—he stood looking on while she caressed and calmed and subdued into silence the dying passion which he would have given anything in the world to stimulate into clearer utterance. She had baffled his efforts, made him helpless to serve her, perhaps injured herself cruelly ; but all the more the Curate loved her for it, as she expanded over her dying father, with the white sleeves hanging loose about her arms like the white wings of an angel, as he thought. Gradually the agony of utterance got subdued, and then Lucy resumed her position by the bed. "He shall not be disturbed," she said again, through lips that were parched with emotion ; and so sat watchful over him, a guardian immovable, ready to defy all the world in defence of his peace.



Mr Wentworth turned away with his heart full. He would have liked to go and kiss her hand or her sleeve or anything belonging to her ; and yet he was impatient beyond expression, and felt that she had baffled and vanquished him. Miss Wodehouse stood behind, still looking on with a half perception of what had happened ; but the mind of the elder sister was occupied with vain hopes and fears, such as inexperienced people are subject to in the presence of death.

"He heard what you said," said Miss Wodehouse ; "don't you think that was a good sign ? Oh, Mr Wentworth, sometimes I think he looks a little better," said the poor lady, looking wistfully into the Curate's face. Mr Wentworth could only shake his head as he hurried away.

"I must go and consult Mr Waters," he said as he passed her. "I shall come back presently ;" and then Miss Wodehouse followed him to the door, to beg him not to speak to Mr Waters of *anything particular*—"For papa has no confidence in him," she said, anxiously. The Curate was nearly driven to his wits' end as he hastened out. He forgot the clouds that surrounded him in his anxiety about this sad household ; for it seemed but too evident that

Mr Wodehouse had made no special provision for his daughters ; and to think of Lucy under the power of her unknown brother, made Mr Wentworth's blood boil.

The shutters were all put up that afternoon in the prettiest house in Grange Lane. The event took Carlingford altogether by surprise ; but other events just then were moving the town into the wildest excitement ; for nothing could be heard, far or near, of poor little Rosa Elsworthy, and everybody was aware that the last time she was seen in Carlingford she was standing by herself in the dark, at Mr Wentworth's garden-door.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MRS MORGAN was in the garden watering her favourite ferns when her husband returned home to dinner on the day of Mr Wodehouse's death. The Rector was late, and she had already changed her dress, and was removing the withered leaves from her prettiest plant of maidenhair, and thinking, with some concern, of the fish, when she heard his step on the gravel; for the cook at the Rectory was rather hasty in her temper, and was apt to be provoking to her mistress next morning when the Rector chose to be late. It was a very hot day, and Mr Morgan was flushed and uncomfortable. To see his wife looking so cool and tranquil in her muslin dress rather aggravated him than otherwise, for she did not betray her anxiety about the trout, but welcomed him with a smile, as she felt it her duty to do, even when he was late for dinner.

The Rector looked as if all the anxieties of the world were on his shoulders, as he came hurriedly along the gravel ; and Mrs Morgan's curiosity was sufficiently excited by his looks to have overcome any consideration but that of the trout, which, however, was too serious to be trifled with ; so, instead of asking questions, she thought it wiser simply to remind her husband that it was past six o'clock. "Dinner is waiting," she said, in her composed way ; and the Rector went up-stairs to wash his hands, half disposed to be angry with his wife. He found her already seated at the head of the table when he came down after his rapid ablutions ; and though he was not particularly quick of perception, Mr Morgan perceived, by the looks of the servant as well as the mistress, that he was generally disapproved of throughout the household for being half an hour too late. As for Thomas, he was at no pains to conceal his sentiments, but conducted himself with distant politeness towards his master, expressing the feelings of the household with all the greater freedom that he had been in possession of the Rectory since Mr Bury's time, and felt himself more secure in his tenure than any incumbent, as was natural to a man who had already outlived

two of these temporary tenants. Mr Morgan was disposed to be conciliatory when he saw the strength of the opposite side.

"I am a little late to-day," said the politic Rector. "Mr Leeson was with me, and I did not want to bring him home to dinner. It was only on Wednesday he dined with us, and I know you don't care for chance guests."

"I think it shows a great want of sense in Mr Leeson to think of such a thing," said Mrs Morgan, responding by a little flush of anger to the unlucky Curate's name. "He might understand that people like to be by themselves now and then. I am surprised that you give in to him so much as you do, William. Good-nature must stop somewhere, and I think it is always best to draw a line."

"I wish it were possible for everybody to draw a line," said the Rector, mysteriously, with a sigh. "I have heard something that has grieved me very much to-day. I will tell you about it afterwards." When he had said this, Mr Morgan addressed himself sadly to his dinner, sighing over it, as if that had something to do with his distress.

"Perhaps, ma'am," suggested Thomas, who was scarcely on speaking terms with his master,

"the Rector mayn't have heard as Mr Wodehouse has been took very bad again, and ain't expected to see out the night ?"

"I am very sorry," said the Rector. "Poor ladies ! it will come very hard upon them. My dear, I think you should call and ask if you can do anything. Troubles never come singly, it is said. I am very sorry for that poor young creature; though, perhaps, things have not gone so far as one imagined." The Rector sighed again, and looked as though his secret, whatever it might be, was almost too much for him. The consequence, of course, was, that Thomas prolonged his services to the last possibility, by way of hearing what had happened; as for Mrs Morgan, she sat on thorns, though her sense of propriety was too great to permit her to hurry over the dinner. The pudding, though it was the Rector's favourite pudding, prepared from a receipt only known at All-Souls, in which the late respected Head of that learned community had concentrated all his genius, was eaten in uneasy silence, broken only by the most transparent attempts on both sides to make a little conversation. Thomas hovered sternly over his master and mistress all the time, exacting with inexorable severity every usage of the table. He

would not let them off the very smallest detail, but insisted on handing round the peaches, notwithstanding Mrs Morgan's protest. "They are the first out of the new orchard-house," said the Rector's wife. "I want your opinion of them. That will do, Thomas ; we have got everything now, I think." Mrs Morgan was a little anxious about the peaches, having made a great many changes on her own responsibility in the gardening department ; but the Rector took the downy fruit as if it had been a turnip, and notwithstanding her interest in the long-delayed news, his wife could not but find it very provoking that he took so little notice of her exertions.

"Roberts stood out against the new flue as long as he could," said Mrs Morgan. "Mr Proctor took no interest in the garden, and everything had gone to ruin ; though I must say it was very odd that anybody from *your* college, William, should be careless about such a vital matter," said the Rector's wife, with a little asperity. "I suppose there must be something in the air of Carlingford which makes people indifferent." Naturally, it was very provoking, after all the trouble she had taken, to see her husband slicing that juicy pulp as if it had been any ordinary market fruit.

"I beg your pardon, my dear," said Mr Morgan; "I was thinking of this story about Mr Wentworth. One is always making new discoveries of the corruption of human nature. He has behaved very badly to me; but it is very sad to see a young man sacrifice all his prospects for the indulgence of his passions; though that is a very secular way of looking at the subject," said the Rector, shaking his head mournfully. "If it is bad in a worldly point of view, what is it in a spiritual? and in this age, too, when it is so important to keep up the character of the clergy!" Mr Morgan sighed again more heavily than ever as he poured out the single glass of port, in which his wife joined him after dinner. "Such an occurrence throws a stigma upon the whole Church, as Mr Leeson very justly remarked."

"I thought Mr Leeson must have something to do with it," said the Rector's wife. "What has Mr Wentworth been doing? When you keep a Low-Church Curate, you never can tell what he may say. If he had known of the All-Souls pudding he would have come to dinner, and we should have had it at first-hand," said Mrs Morgan, severely. She put away her peach in her resentment, and went to a side-table for

her work, which she always kept handy for emergencies. Like her husband, Mrs Morgan had acquired some little "ways" in the long ten years of their engagement, one of which was a confirmed habit of needlework at all kinds of unnecessary moments, which much disturbed the Rector when he had anything particular to say.

"My dear, I am very sorry to see you so much the victim of prejudice," said Mr Morgan. "I had hoped that all our long experiences——" and here the Rector stopped short, troubled to see the rising colour in his wife's face. "I don't mean to blame you, my dear," said the perplexed man; "I know you were always very patient;" and he paused, not knowing what more to say, comforting himself with the thought that women were incomprehensible creatures, as so many men have done before.

"I am not patient," said the Rector's wife; "it never was my nature. I can't help thinking sometimes that our long experiences have done us more harm than good; but I hope nothing will ever make me put up with a Curate who tells tales about other people, and flatters one's self, and comes to dinner without being asked. Perhaps Mr Wentworth is very

sinful, but at least he is a gentleman," said Mrs Morgan ; and she bent her head over her work, and drove her needle so fast through the muslin she was at work upon, that it glimmered and sparkled like summer lightning before the spectator's dazzled eyes.

" I am sorry you are so prejudiced," said the Rector. " It is a very unbecoming spirit, my dear, though I am grieved to say so much to you. Mr Leeson is a very good young man, and he has nothing to do with this terrible story about Mr Wentworth. I don't wish to shock your feelings—but there are a great many things in the world that one can't explain to ladies. He has got himself into a most distressing position, and a public inquiry will be necessary. One can't help seeing the hand of Providence in it," said the Rector, playing reflectively with the peach on his plate.

It was at this moment that Thomas appeared at the door to announce Mr Leeson, who had come to talk over the topic of the day with the Rector—being comfortably obtuse in his perceptions, and quite disposed to ignore Mrs Morgan's general demeanour towards himself. " I am sure she has a bad temper," he would say to his confidants in the parish ; " you can

see it by the redness in her face : but I never take any notice when she says rude things to me." The redness was alarming in Mrs Morgan's face as the unlucky man became visible at the door. She said audibly, "I knew we should be interrupted!" and got up from her chair. "As Mr Leeson is here, you will not want me, William," she added, in her precisest tones. "If anything has happened since you came in, he will be able to tell you about it ; and perhaps I had better send you your coffee here, for I have a great many things to do." Mr Morgan gave a little groan in his spirit as his wife went away. To do him justice, he had a great deal of confidence in her, and was unconsciously guided by her judgment in many matters. Talking it over with Mr Leeson was a totally different thing ; for whatever might be said in his defence, there could not be any doubt that the Curate professed Low-Church principles, and had been known to drink tea with Mr Beecher, the new minister of Salem Chapel. "Not that I object to Mr Beecher because he is a Dissenter," Mr Morgan said, "but because, my dear, you know, it is a totally different class of society." When the Rector was left alone to discuss parish matters

with this doubtful subordinate, instead of going into the subject with his wife, the good man felt a pang of disappointment ; for though he professed to be reluctant to shock her, he had been longing all the time to enter into the story, which was certainly the most exciting which had occurred in Carlingford since the beginning of his incumbency. Mrs Morgan, for her part, went up-stairs to the drawing-room with so much indignation about this personal grievance that she almost forgot her curiosity. Mr Lesson hung like a cloud over all the advantages of Carlingford ; he put out that new flue in the greenhouse, upon which she was rather disposed to pique herself, and withered her ferns, which everybody allowed to be the finest collection within a ten miles' circuit. This sense of disgust increased upon her as she went into the drawing-room, where her eye naturally caught that carpet which had been the first cross of her married life. When she had laid down her work, she began to plan how the offensive bouquets might be covered with a pinafore of linen, which looked very cool and nice in summer-time. And then the Rector's wife reflected that in winter a floor covered with white looked chilly, and that a woollen drugget of an appro-

priate small pattern would be better on the whole ; but no such thing was to be had without going to London for it, which brought her mind back again to Mr Leeson and all the disadvantages of Carlingford. These subjects occupied Mrs Morgan to the exclusion of external matters, as was natural ; and when she heard the gentlemen stir down-stairs, as if with ideas of joining her in the drawing-room, the Rector's wife suddenly recollect ed that she had promised some tea to a poor woman in Grove Street, and that she could not do better this beautiful evening than take it in her own person. She was very active in her district at all times, and had proved herself an admirable clergywoman ; but perhaps it would not have occurred to her to go out upon a charitable errand that particular evening had it not been for the presence of Mr Leeson down-stairs.

It was such a very lovely night, that Mrs Morgan was tempted to go farther than she intended. She called on two or three of her favourites in Grove Street, and was almost as friendly with them as Lucy Wodehouse was with the people in Prickett's Lane ; but being neither pretty and young, like Lucy, nor yet a mother with a nursery, qualified to talk about the

measles, her reception was not quite as enthusiastic as it might have been. Somehow it would appear as though our poor neighbours loved most the ministrations of youth, which is superior to all ranks in the matter of possibility and expectation, and inferior to all ranks in the matter of experience ; and so holds a kind of balance and poise of nature between the small and the great. Mrs Morgan was vaguely sensible of her disadvantages in this respect as well as in others. She never could help imagining what she might have been had she married ten years before at the natural period. "And even then not a girl," she said to herself in her sensible way, as she carried this habitual thread of thought with her along the street, past the little front gardens, where there were so many mothers with their children. On the other side of the way the genteel houses frowned darkly with their staircase windows upon the humility of Grove Street ; and Mrs Morgan began to think within herself of the Miss Hemmings and other spinsters, and how they got along upon this path of life, which, after all, is never very lightsome to behold, except in the future or the past. It was dead present with the Rector's wife just then, and many specula-

tions were in her mind, as was natural. "Not that I could not have lived unmarried," she continued within herself, with a woman's pride; "but things looked so different at five-and-twenty!" and in her heart she grudged the cares she had lost, and sighed over this wasting of her years.

It was just then that the youngest Miss Hemmings saw Mrs Morgan, and crossed over to speak to her. Miss Hemmings had left five-and-thirty behind a long time ago, and thought the Rector's wife a happy woman in the bloom of youth. When she had discovered conclusively that Mrs Morgan would not go in to have a cup of tea, Miss Hemmings volunteered to walk with her to the corner ; and it is not necessary to say that she immediately plunged into the topic which at that moment engaged all minds in Carlingford. "If I had not seen it with my own eyes, I should not have believed it," said Miss Hemmings. "I should have thought it a got-up story ; not that I ever could have thought it *impossible*, as you say—for, alas ! I know well that without grace every wickedness is more than possible—but I saw them with my own eyes, my dear Mrs Morgan ; she standing outside, the bold little thing, and he at the door—as if it was right for a clergyman to open the door

like a man-servant—and from that moment to this she has not been seen by any living creature in Carlingford: who can tell what may have been done with her?" cried the horrified eyewitness. "She has never been seen from that hour!"

"But that was only twenty-four hours ago," said Mrs Morgan; "she may have gone off to visit some of her friends."

"Ah, my dear Mrs Morgan, twenty-four hours is a long time for a girl to disappear out of her own home," said Miss Hemmings; "and all her friends have been sent to, and no word can be heard of her. I am afraid it will go very hard with Mr Wentworth; and I am sure it looks like a judgment upon him for all his candlesticks and flowers and things," she continued, out of breath with the impetuosity of her tale.

"Do you think, then, that God makes people sin in order to punish them?" said Mrs Morgan, with some fire, which shocked Miss Hemmings, who did not quite know how to reply.

"I do so wish you would come in for a few minutes and taste our tea; my sister Sophia was just making it when I came out. We get it from our brother in Assam, and we think a great deal of it," said Miss Hemmings; "it can't possibly be adulterated, you know, for it comes

direct from his plantation. If you can't come in just now, I will send you some to the Rectory, and you shall tell us how you like it. We are quite proud of our tea. My brother has a large plantation, and he hopes——”

“Thank you,” said Mrs Morgan, “but the Rector will be waiting for me, and I must go. It must be very nice to have your tea direct from the plantation ; and I hope you will change your mind about Mr Wentworth,” she continued, without much regard for punctuation, as she shook hands at the corner. Mrs Morgan went down the narrow street which led to Grange Lane, after this interview, with some commotion in her mind. She took Mr Wentworth’s part instinctively, without asking any proofs of his innocence. The sun was just setting, and St Roque’s stood out dark and picturesque against all the glory of the western sky as the Rector’s wife went past. She could not help thinking of him, in his youth and the opening of his career, with a kind of wistful interest. If he had married Lucy Wodehouse, and confined himself to his own district (but then he had no district), Mrs Morgan would have contemplated the two, not, indeed, without a certain half-resentful self-

reference and contrast, but with natural sympathy. And now, to think of this dark and ugly blot on his fair beginning disturbed her much. When Mrs Morgan recollectcd that she had left her husband and his curate consulting over this matter, she grew very hot and angry, and felt humiliated by the thought. Was it her William, her hero, whom she had magnified for all these ten years, though not without occasional twinges of enlightenment, into something great, who was thus sitting upon his young brother with so little human feeling and so much middle-aged jealousy? It hurt her to think of it, though not for Mr Wentworth's sake. Poor Mrs Morgan, though not at all a sentimental person, had hoarded up her ideal so much after the ordinary date, that it came all the harder upon her when everything thus merged into the light of common day. She walked very fast up Grange Lane, which was another habit of her maidenhood not quite in accord with the habit of sauntering acquired during the same period by the Fellow of All-Souls. When Mrs Morgan was opposite Mr Wodehouse's, she looked across with some interest, thinking of Lucy ; and it shocked her greatly to see the closed shutters, which told of the presence of death. Then, a little farther up,

she could see Elsworthy in front of his shop, which was already closed, talking vehemently to a little group round the door. The Rector's wife crossed the street, to avoid coming in contact with this excited party; and, as she went swiftly along under the garden-walls, came direct, without perceiving it, upon Mr Wentworth, who was going the opposite way. They were both absorbed in their own thoughts, the Perpetual Curate only perceiving Mrs Morgan in time to take off his hat to her as he passed; and, to tell the truth, having no desire for any further intercourse. Mrs Morgan, however, was of a different mind. She stopped instantly, as soon as she perceived him. "Mr Wentworth, it is getting late—will you walk with me as far as the Rectory?" she said, to the Curate's great astonishment. He could not help looking at her with curiosity as he turned to accompany her. Mrs Morgan was still wearing her wedding things, which were not now in their first freshness—not to say that the redness, of which she was so painfully sensible, was rather out of accordance with the orange blossoms. Then she was rather flurried and disturbed in her mind; and, on the whole, Mr Wentworth ungratefully concluded the Rector's wife to be looking her

plainest, as he turned with very languid interest to see her safely home.

“A great many things seem to be happening just now,” said Mrs Morgan, with a good deal of embarrassment; “I suppose the people in Carlingford are grateful to anybody who gives them something to talk about.”

“I don’t know about the gratitude,” said the Perpetual Curate; “it is a sentiment I don’t believe in.”

“You ought to believe in everything as long as you are young,” said Mrs Morgan. “I want very much to speak to you, Mr Wentworth; but then I don’t know how you will receive what I am going to say.”

“I can’t tell until I know what it is,” said the Curate, shutting himself up. He had an expressive face generally, and Mrs Morgan saw the shutters put up and the jealous blinds drawn over the young man’s countenance as clearly as if they had been tangible articles. He did not look at her, but kept swinging his cane in his hand, and regarding the pavement with downcast eyes; and if the Rector’s wife had formed any expectations of finding in the Perpetual Curate an ingenuous young heart, open to sympathy and criticism, she now discovered her mistake.

"If I run the risk, perhaps you will forgive me," said Mrs Morgan. "I have just been hearing a dreadful story about you ; and I don't believe it in the least, Mr Wentworth," she continued, with a little effusion ; for though she was very sensible, she was only a woman, and did not realise the possibility of having her sympathy rejected, and her favourable judgment received with indifference.

"I am much flattered by your good opinion. What was the dreadful story ?" asked Mr Wentworth, looking at her with careless eyes. They were just opposite Elsworthy's shop, and could almost hear what he was saying, as he stood in the midst of his little group of listeners, talking loud and vehemently. The Perpetual Curate looked calmly at him across the road, and turned again to Mrs Morgan, repeating his question, "What was the dreadful story ?—one gets used to romances," he said, with a composure too elaborate to be real ; but Mrs Morgan did not think of that.

"If you don't care about it, I need not say anything," said the Rector's wife, who could not help feeling affronted. "But I am so sorry that Mr Morgan and you don't get on," she continued, after a little pause. "I have no right to speak ;

but I take an interest in everything that belongs to the parish. If you would put a little confidence in my husband, things might go on better; but, in the mean time, I thought I might say to you, on my own account, that I had heard this scandal, and that I don't believe in it. If you do not understand my motive, I can't help it," said the Rector's wife, who was now equally ready for friendship or for battle.

"Thanks; I understand what you mean," said Mr Wentworth, who had come to himself. "But will you tell me what it is you don't believe in?" he asked, with a smile which Mrs Morgan did not quite comprehend.

"I will tell you," she said, with a little quiet exasperation. "I don't think you would risk your prospects, and get yourself into trouble, and damage your entire life, for the sake of any girl, however pretty she might be. Men don't do such things for women nowadays, even when it is a worthy object," said the disappointed optimist. "And I believe you are a great deal more sensible, Mr Wentworth." There was just that tone of mingled approval and contempt in this speech which a woman knows how to deliver herself of without any appearance of feeling;

and which no young man, however *blasé*, can hear with composure.

“Perhaps not,” he said, with a little heat and a rising colour. “I am glad you think me so sensible.” And then there ensued a pause, upon the issue of which depended the question of peace or war between these two. Mr Wentworth’s good angel, perhaps, dropped softly through the dusky air that moment, and jogged his perverse charge with the tip of a celestial wing. “And yet there might be women in the world for whom——” said the Curate; and stopped again. “I daresay you are not anxious to know my sentiments on the subject,” he continued, with a little laugh. “I am sorry you think so badly—I mean so well of me.”

“I don’t think badly of you,” said Mrs Morgan, hastily. “Thank you for walking with me; and whatever happens, remember that I for one don’t believe a word of it,” she said, holding out her hand. After this little declaration of friendship, the Rector’s wife returned to the Rectory, where her husband was waiting for her, more than ever prepared to stand up for Mr Wentworth. She went back to the drawing-room, forgetting all about the carpet, and poured out the tea with satisfaction, and made herself very

agreeable to Mr Finial, the architect, who had come to talk over the restorations. In that moment of stimulation she forgot all her experience of her husband's puzzled looks, of the half-comprehension with which he looked at her, and the depths of stubborn determination which were far beyond the reach of her hastier and more generous spirit, and so went on with more satisfaction and gaiety than she had felt possible for a long time, beating her drums and blowing her trumpets, to the encounter in which her female forces were so confident of victory.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MR WENTWORTH went upon his way, after he had parted from Mrs Morgan, with a moment's gratitude; but he had not gone half-a-dozen steps before that amiable sentiment yielded to a sense of soreness and vexation. He had almost acknowledged that he was conscious of the slander against which he had made up his mind to present a blank front of unconsciousness and passive resistance, and he was angry with himself for his susceptibility to this unexpected voice of kindness. He was going home, but he did not care for going home. Poor Mrs Hadwin's anxious looks of suspicion had added to the distaste with which he thought of encountering again the sullen shabby rascal to whom he had given shelter. It was Saturday night, and he had still his sermon to prepare for the next day; but the young man was in a state of dis-

gust with all the circumstances of his lot, and could not make up his mind to go in and address himself to his work as he ought to have done. Such a sense of injustice and cruelty as possessed him was not likely to promote composition, especially as the pulpit addresses of the Curate of St Roque's were not of a declamatory kind. To think that so many years' work could be neutralised in a day by a sudden breath of scandal, made him not humble or patient, but fierce and resentful. He had been in Wharfside that afternoon, and felt convinced that even the dying woman at No. 10 Prickett's Lane had heard of Rosa Elsworthy ; and he saw, or imagined he saw, many a distrustful inquiring glance thrown at him by people to whom he had been a kind of secondary Providence. Naturally the mere thought of the failing allegiance of the "district" went to Mr Wentworth's heart. When he turned round suddenly from listening to a long account of one poor family's distresses, and saw Tom Burrows, the gigantic bargeman, whose six children the Curate had baptised in a lump, and whose baby had been held at the font by Lucy Wodehouse herself, looking at him wistfully with rude affection, and something that looked very much

like pity, it is impossible to describe the bitterness that welled up in the mind of the Perpetual Curate. Instead of leaving Wharfside comforted as he usually did, he came away wounded and angry, feeling to its full extent the fickleness of popular sympathy. And when he came into Grange Lane and saw the shutters closed, and Mr Wodehouse's green door shut fast, as if never more to open, all sources of consolation seemed to be shut against him. Even the habit he had of going into Elsworthy's to get his newspaper, and to hear what talk might be current in Carlingford, contributed to the sense of utter discomfort and wretchedness which overwhelmed him. Men in other positions have generally to consult the opinion of their equals only ; but all sorts of small people can plant thorns in the path of a priest who has given himself with fervour to the duties of his office. True enough, such clouds blow by, and sometimes leave behind a sky clearer than before ; but that result is doubtful, and Mr Wentworth was not of the temper to comfort himself with philosophy. He felt ingratitude keenly, as men do at eight-and-twenty, even when they have made up their minds that gratitude is a delusion ; and still more keenly,

with deep resentment and indignation, he felt the horrible doubt which had diffused itself around him, and seemed to be looking at him out of everybody's eyes. In such a state of mind one bethinks one's self of one's relations—those friends not always congenial, but whom one looks to instinctively, when one is young, in the crises of life. He knocked at his aunts' door almost without knowing it, as he went down Grange Lane, after leaving Mrs Morgan, with vague sentences of his sermon floating in his mind through all the imbroglio of other thoughts. Even aunt Dora's foolish affection might have been a little comfort at the moment, and he could not but be a little curious to know whether they had heard Elsworthy's story, and what the patronesses of Skelmersdale thought of the matter. Somehow, just then, in the midst of his distresses, a vision of Skelmersdale burst upon the Perpetual Curate like a glimpse of a better world. If he could but escape there out of all this sickening misconception and ingratitude—if he could but take Lucy into his protecting arms, and carry her away far from the clouds that were gathering over her path as well as his own. The thought found vent in an impatient long-drawn sigh, and was then

expelled contemptuously from the young man's bosom. If a hundred Skelmersdales were in his power, here, where his honour had been attacked, it was necessary to remain, in the face of all obstacles, till it was cleared.

The Miss Wentworths had just come up to the drawing-room after dinner when their nephew entered. As for Miss Dora, she had seated herself by the window, which was open, and, with her light little curls fluttering upon her cheek, was watching a tiny puff of smoke by the side of the great laurel, which indicated the spot occupied at this moment by Jack and his cigar. "Dear fellow, he does enjoy the quiet," she said, with a suppressed little sniff of emotion. "To think we should be in such misery about poor dear Frank, and have Jack, about whom we have all been so unbelieving, sent to us for a consolation. My poor brother will be so happy," said Miss Dora, almost crying at the thought. She was under the influence of this sentiment when the Curate entered. It was perhaps impossible for Mr Wentworth to present himself before his three aunts at the present crisis without a certain consciousness in his looks; and it was well that it was twilight, and he could not read distinctly all that was

written in their countenances. Miss Cecilia held out her lovely old hand to him first of all. She said, "How do you do, Frank?" which was not very original, but yet counted for a good deal in the silence. When he came up to her, she offered him her sweet old cheek with a look of pity which touched, and yet affronted, the Perpetual Curate. He thought it was the wisest way to accept the challenge at once.

"It is very good of you, but you need not be sorry for me," he said, as he sat down by her. And then there was a little pause—an awful pause; for Miss Wentworth had no further observations to offer, and Miss Dora, who had risen up hastily, dropped into her chair again in a disconsolate condition, when she saw that her nephew did not take any notice of her. The poor little woman sat down with miserable sensations, and did not find the comfort she hoped for in contemplation of the smoke of Jack's cigar. After all, it was Frank who was the original owner of Miss Dora's affections. When she saw him, as she thought, in a state of guilt and trouble, received with grim silence by the dreaded Leonora, the poor lady began to waver greatly, divided between a longing to return to her old allegiance, and a certain pride in the

new bonds which bound her to so great a sinner as Jack. She could not help feeling the distinction of having such a reprobate in her hands. But the sight of Frank brought back old habits, and Miss Dora felt at her wits' end, and could not tell what to do.

At length Miss Leonora's voice, which was decided contralto, broke the silence. "I am very glad to see you, Frank," said the strong-minded aunt. "From something we heard, I supposed you had gone away for a time, and we were rather anxious about your movements. There are so many things going on in the family just now, that one does not know what to think. I am glad to see you are still in Carlingford."

"I never had the least intention of going away," said Mr Wentworth. "I can't imagine who could tell you so."

"Nobody told us," said Miss Leonora; "we drew that conclusion from other things we heard. Dora, give Frank the newspaper with that paragraph about Gerald. I have prophesied from the first which way Gerald was tending. It is very shocking of him, and I don't know what they are to do, for Louisa is an expensive little fool; and if he leaves the Rectory, they can't have enough to live on. If

you knew what your brother was going to do, why didn't you advise him otherwise? Besides, he will be wretched," said the discriminating woman. "I never approved of his ways, but I could not say anything against his sincerity. I believe his heart was in his work; a man may be very zealous, and yet very erroneous," said Miss Leonora, like an oracle out of the shadows.

"I don't know if he is erroneous or not—but I know I should like to punch this man's head," said the Curate, who had taken the paper to the window, where there was just light enough to make out the paragraph. He stood looming over Miss Dora, a great black shadow against the fading light. "All the mischief in the world comes of these villainous papers," said Mr Wentworth. "Though I did not think anybody nowadays believed in the 'Chronicle.' Gerald has not gone over to Rome, and I don't think he means to go. I daresay you have agitated yourself unnecessarily about more than one supposed event in the family," he continued, throwing the paper on the table. "I don't know anything very alarming that has happened as yet, except perhaps the prodigal's return," said the Perpetual Curate, with a slight touch of bitterness. His eye had just lighted on Jack saunter-

ing through the garden with his cigar ; and Mr Wentworth was human, and could not entirely refrain from the expression of his sentiments.

“ But, oh, Frank, my dear, you are not angry about poor Jack ? ” said Miss Dora. “ He has not known what it was to be at home for years and years. A stepmother is so different from an own mother, and he never has had any opportunities ; and, oh, Frank, don’t you remember that there is joy in heaven ? ” cried the anxious aunt—“ not to say that he is the eldest son. And it is such a thing for the family to see him changing his ways in such a beautiful spirit ! ” said Miss Dora. The room was almost dark by this time, and she did not see that her penitent had entered while she spoke.

“ It is very consoling to gain your approval, aunt Dora,” said Jack. “ My brother Frank doesn’t know me. If the Squire *will* make a nursery of his house, what can a man do ? But a fellow can’t be quite ruined as long as he has——” aunts, the reprobate was about to say, with an inflection of laughter intended for Frank’s ear only in his voice ; but he fortunately remembered in time that Miss Leonora had an acute intelligence, and was not to be

trifled with—"As long as he has female relations," said Jack, in his most feeling tone. "Men never sympathise with men." He seemed to be apologising for Frank's indifference, as well as for his own sins. He had just had a very good dinner—for the Miss Wentworths' cook was the best in Carlingford—and Jack, whose digestion was perfect, was disposed to please everybody, and had, in particular, no disposition to quarrel with Frank.

"Oh, my dear, you see how humble and forgiving he is," said Miss Dora, rising on tiptoe to whisper into the Curate's ear; "and always takes your part whenever you are mentioned," said the injudicious aunt. Meantime the other sisters were very silent, sitting each in the midst of her own group of shadows. Then Miss Leonora rose with a sudden rustling of all her draperies, and with her own energetic hand rang the bell.

"Now the lamp is coming," said Jack, in a tone of despair, "a bright, blank, pitiless globe like the world; and instead of this delicious darkness, where one can see nothing distinctly, my heart will be torn asunder for the rest of the evening by the sight of suicide. Why do we ever have lights!" said the exquisite, laying

himself down softly on a sofa. When the lamp was brought in, Jack became visible stretched out in an attitude of perfect repose and tranquillity, with a quiet conscience written in every fold of his scrupulous apparel. As for Frank, on the contrary, he was still in morning-dress, and was biting his nails, and had a cloud upon his brow which the sudden light disclosed like a traitor before he was prepared for it. Between the two brothers such a contrast was visible that it was not surprising if Miss Dora, still wavering in her allegiance, went back with relief to the calm countenance of her penitent, and owned to herself with trembling that the Curate looked preoccupied and guilty. Perhaps Miss Leonora came to a similar conclusion. She seated herself at her writing-table with her usual air of business, and made a pen to a hard point by the light of the candles, which were sacred to her particular use.

"I heard some news this morning which pleased me very much," said Miss Leonora. "I daresay you remember Julia Trench? You two used to be a great deal together at one time. She is going to be married to Mr Shirley's excellent curate, who is a young man of the highest character. He did very well at the univer-

sity, I believe," said the patroness of Skelmersdale; "but I confess I don't care much for academical honours. He is an excellent clergyman, which is a great deal more to the purpose, and I thoroughly agree with his views. So, knowing the interest we take in Julia, you may think how pleased we were," said Miss Leonora, looking full into her nephew's face. He knew what she meant as distinctly as if she had put it in words.

"When is old Shirley going to die?" said Jack from the sofa. "It's rather hard upon Frank, keeping him out of the living so long; and if I were you, I'd be jealous of this model curate," said the fine gentleman, with a slight civil yawn. "I don't approve of model curates upon family livings. People are apt to make comparisons," said Jack, and then he raised his head with a little energy—"Ah, there it is," said the Sybarite, "the first moth. Don't be precipitate, my dear fellow. Aunt Dora, pray sit quietly where you are, and don't disturb our operations. It is only a moth, to be sure; but don't let us cut short the moments of a creature that has no hereafter," said Jack, solemnly. He disturbed them all by this eccentric manifestation of benevolence, and flapped his handker-

chief round Miss Dora, upon whose white cap the unlucky moth, frightened by its benefactor's vehemence, was fluttering wildly. Jack even forgot himself so far as to swear softly in French at the frightened insect as it flew wildly off at a tangent, not to the open window, but to Miss Leonora's candles, where it came to an immediate end. Miss Leonora sat rather grimly looking on at all this byplay. When her elegant nephew threw himself back once more upon his sofa, she glanced from him to his brother with a comparison which perhaps was not so much to the disadvantage of the Perpetual Curate. But even Miss Leonora, though so sensible, had her weaknesses ; and she was very evangelical, and could put up with a great deal from the sinner who had placed himself for conversion in her hands.

"We have too great a sense of our responsibility to treat Skelmersdale simply as a family living," she said. "Besides, Frank of course is to have Wentworth Rectory. Gerald's perversion is a great blow ; but still, if it *is* to be, Frank will be provided for at least. As for our parish——"

"I beg your pardon," said the Curate ; "I have not the least intention of leaving Carling-

ford. At the present moment neither Skelmerville nor Wentworth would tempt me. I am in no doubt as to where my work lies, and there is enough of it to satisfy any man." He could not help thinking, as he spoke, of ungrateful Wharf-side, for which he had done so much, and the recollection brought a little flush of indignant colour to his cheek.

"Oh, Frank, my dear," said Miss Dora in a whisper, stealing up to him, "if it is not true, you must not mind. Oh, my dear boy, nobody will mind it if it is not true." She put her hand timidly upon his arm as she reached up to his ear, and at the same time the poor little woman, who was trying all she could to serve two masters, kept one eye upon Jack, lest her momentary return to his brother might have a disastrous effect upon the moral reformation which she was nursing with so much care. As for the Curate, he gave her a hasty glance, which very nearly made an end of Miss Dora. She retired to her seat with no more courage to say anything, unable to make out whether it was virtuous reproach or angry guilt which looked at her so sternly. She felt her headache coming on as she sank again upon her chair. If she could but have stolen away to her own room, and had a

good comforting cry in the dark, it might have kept off the headache ; but then she had to be faithful to her post, and to look after the reformation of Jack.

“ I have no doubt that a great work might be done in Carlingford,” said Miss Leonora, “ if you would take my advice and organise matters properly, and make due provision for the lay element. As for Sisters of Mercy, I never had any belief in them. They only get young clergymen into mischief,” said the strong-minded aunt. “ We are going to have tea, Frank, if you will have some. Poor Mr Shirley has got matters into very bad order at Skelmersdale, but things will be different under the new incumbent, I hope,” said Miss Leonora, shooting a side-glance of keen inspection at the Curate, who bore it steadily.

“ I hope he will conduct himself to your satisfaction,” said Mr Wentworth, with a bland but somewhat grim aspect, from the window ; “ but I can’t wait for tea. I have still got some of my work to do for to-morrow ; so good-night.”

“ I’ll walk with you, Frank,” said his elder brother. “ My dear aunts, don’t look alarmed ; nothing can happen to me. There are few temptations in Grange Lane ; and, besides, I shall

come back directly. *I cannot do without my tea,*" said Jack, by way of consoling poor Miss Dora, who had started with consternation at the proposal. And the two brothers went out into the fresh evening air together, their aunt Dora watching them from the window with inexpressible anxiety; for perhaps it was not quite right for a clergyman to saunter out of doors in the evening with such a doubtful member of society as Jack; and perhaps Frank, having himself fallen into evil ways, might hinder or throw obstacles in the way of his brother's re-establishment in the practice of all the virtues. Miss Dora, who had to carry them both upon her shoulders, and who got no sympathy in the present case from her hard-hearted sisters, was fain at last to throw a shawl over her head and steal out to that summer-house which was built into the garden-wall, and commanded Grange Lane from its little window. There she established herself in the darkness, an affectionate spy. There ought to have been a moon that night, and accordingly the lamps were not lighted at that end of Grange Lane, for the authorities in Carlingford bore a frugal mind. But the sky had become cloudy, and the moon shone only by intervals, which gave a certain character of

mystery and secrecy to the night. Through this uncertain light the anxious woman saw her two nephews coming and going under the window, apparently in the most eager conversation. Miss Dora's anxiety grew to such a height that she opened softly a chink of the window in hopes of being able to hear as well as to see, but that attempt was altogether unsuccessful. Then, when they had walked about for half an hour, which looked like two hours to Miss Dora, who was rapidly taking one of her bad colds at the half-open window, they were joined by another figure which she did not think she had ever seen before. The excitement was growing tremendous, and the aspect of the three conspirators more and more alarming, when the poor lady started with a little scream at a noise behind her, and, turning round, saw her maid, severe as a pursuing Fate, standing at the door. "After giving me your word as you wouldn't come no more!" said the reproachful despot who swayed Miss Dora's soul. After that she had to make the best of her way indoors, thankful not to be carried to her room and put into hot water, which was the original intention of Collins. But it would be impossible to describe the emotions of Miss Dora's mind after this glimpse into the

heart of the volcano on which her innocent feet were standing. Unless it were murder or high treason, what could they have to plot about ? or was the mysterious stranger a disguised Jesuit, and the whole business some terrible Papist conspiracy ? Jack, who had been so much abroad, and Gerald, who was going over to Rome, and Frank, who was in trouble of every description, got entangled together in Miss Dora's disturbed imagination. No reality could be so frightful as the fancies with which she distracted herself after that peep from the summer-house ; and it would be impossible to describe the indignation of Collins, who knew that her mistress would kill herself some day, and was aware that she, in her own person, would get little rest that night.

CHAPTER XXX.

"I DON'T know what is the exact connection between tea and reformation," said Jack Wentworth, with a wonderful yawn. "When I consider that this is all on account of that stupid beast Wodehouse, I feel disposed to eat him. By the way, they have got a capital cook ; I did not think such a *cuisine* was the sort of thing to be found in the bosom of one's family, which has meant boiled mutton up to this moment, to my uninstructed imagination. But the old ladies are in a state of excitement which, I presume, is unusual to them. It appears you have been getting into scrapes like other people, though you are a parson. As your elder brother, my dear Frank——"

"Look here," said the Perpetual Curate ; "you want to ask about Wodehouse. I will answer your questions, since you seem to have

some interest in him ; but I don't speak of my private affairs to any but my intimate friends," said Mr Wentworth, who was not in a humour to be trifled with.

The elder brother shrugged his shoulders. "It is curious to remark the progress of the younger members of one's family," he said, reflectively. "When you were a little boy, you took your drubbings dutifully; but never mind, we've another subject in hand. I take an interest in Wodehouse, and so do you—I can't tell for what reason. Perhaps he is one of the intimate friends with whom you discuss your private affairs ? but that is a matter quite apart from the subject. The thing is that he has to be taken care of—not for his own sake, as I don't need to explain to you," said Jack. "I hear the old fellow died to-day, which was the best thing he could have done, upon the whole. Perhaps you can tell me how much he had, and how he has left it ? We may have to take different sides, and the fellow himself is a snob ; but I should like to understand exactly the state of affairs between you and me as gentlemen," said the heir of the Wentworths. Either a passing spasm of compunction passed over him as he said the word, or it was the moon, which had just

flung aside the last fold of cloud and burst out upon them as they turned back facing her. "When we know how the affair stands, we can either negotiate or fight," he added, puffing a volume of smoke from his cigar. "Really a very fine effect—that little church of yours comes well against that bit of sky. It looks like a Constable, or rather it would look like a Constable, thrusting up that bit of a spire into the blue, if it happened to be daylight," said Jack, making a tube of his hand, and regarding the picture with great interest. Miss Dora at her window beheld the movement with secret horror and apprehension, and took it for some mysterious sign.

"I know nothing about Mr Wodehouse's property," said the Curate : "I wish I knew enough law to understand it. He has left no will, I believe ;" and Mr Wentworth watched his brother's face with no small interest as he spoke.

"Very like a Constable," said Jack, still with his hands to his eyes. "These clouds to the right are not a bad imitation of some effects of his. I beg your pardon, but Constable is my passion. And so old Wodehouse has left no will ? What *has* he left ? some daughters ? Excuse my curiosity," said the elder brother. "I am a man of the world, you know. If you

like this other girl well enough to compromise yourself on her account (which, mind you, I think a great mistake), you can't mean to go in at the same time for that pretty sister, eh? It's a sort of sport I don't attempt myself—though it may be the correct thing for a clergyman, for anything I can tell to the contrary," said the tolerant critic.

Mr Wentworth had swallowed down the interruptions that rushed to his lips, and heard his brother out with unusual patience. After all, perhaps Jack was the only man in the world whom he could ask to advise him in such an emergency. "I take it for granted that you don't mean to insult either me or my profession," he said, gravely; "and, to tell the truth, here is one point upon which I should be glad of your help. I am convinced that it is Wodehouse who has carried away this unfortunate girl. She is a little fool, and he has imposed upon her. If you can get him to confess this, and to restore her to her friends, you will lay me under the deepest obligation," said the Perpetual Curate, with unusual energy. "I don't mind telling you that such a slander disables me, and goes to my heart." When he had once begun to speak on the subject, he could not help express-

ing himself fully; and Jack, who had grown out of acquaintance with the nobler sentiments, woke up with a slight start through all his moral being to recognise the thrill of subdued passion and scorn and grief which was in his brother's voice. Innocent Miss Dora, who knew no evil, had scarcely a doubt in *her* mind that Frank was guilty; but Jack, who scarcely knew what goodness was, acquitted his brother instantaneously, and required no other proof. Perhaps if he had been capable of any impression beyond an intellectual one, this little incident might, in Miss Dora's own language, have "done him good."

"So you have nothing to do with it?" he said, with a smile. "Wodehouse! but then the fellow hasn't a penny. I see some one skulking along under the walls that looks like him. Hist! Smith—Tom—what do they call you? We want you here," said Jack, upon whom the moon was shining full. Where he stood in his evening coat and spotless breadth of linen, the heir of the Wentworths was ready to meet the eye of all the world. His shabby subordinate stopped short, with a kind of sullen admiration, to look at him. Wodehouse knew the nature of Jack Wentworth's pursuits a great deal better

than his brother did, and that some of them would not bear much investigation ; but when he saw him stand triumphant in gorgeous apparel, fearing no man, the poor rascal, whom everybody kicked at, rose superior to his own misfortunes. He had not made much of it in his own person, but that life was not altogether a failure which had produced Jack Wentworth. He obeyed his superior's call with instinctive fidelity, proud, in spite of himself, to be living the same life and sharing the same perils. When he emerged into the moonlight, his shaggy countenance looked excited and haggard. Notwithstanding all his experiences, he was not of a constitution which could deny nature. He had inflicted every kind of torture upon his father while living, and had no remorse to speak of now that he was dead ; but, notwithstanding, the fact of the death affected him. His eyes looked wilder than usual, and his face older and more worn, and he looked round him with a kind of clandestine skulking instinct as he came out of the shadow into the light.

This was the terrible conjunction which Miss Dora saw from her window. The anxious woman did not wait long enough to be aware that the Curate left the other two to such con-

sultations as were inevitable between them, and went away very hastily to his own house, and to the work which still awaited him—"When the wicked man turneth away from the evil of his ways, and doeth that which is lawful and right." Mr Wentworth, when he came back to it, sat for about an hour over his text before he wrote a single syllable. His heart had been wrung that day by the sharpest pangs which can be inflicted upon a proud and generous spirit. He was disposed to be bitter against all the world—against the dull eyes that would not see, the dull ears that could shut themselves against all suggestions either of gratitude or justice. It appeared to him, on the whole, that the wicked man was every way the best off in this world, besides being wooed and besought to accept the blessings of the other. And the Curate was conscious of an irrepressible inclination to exterminate the human vermin, who made the earth such an imbroglio of distress and misery; and was sore and wounded in his heart to feel how his own toils and honest purposes availed him nothing, and how all the interest and sympathy of bystanders went to the pretender. These sentiments naturally complicated his thoughts, and made composition

difficult ; not to say that they added a thrill of human feeling warmer than usual to the short and succinct sermon. It was not an emotional sermon, in the ordinary sense of the word ; but it was so for Mr Wentworth, who carried to an extreme point the Anglican dislike for pulpit exaggeration in all forms. The Perpetual Curate was not a natural orator. He had very little of the eloquence which gave Mr Vincent so much success in the Dissenting connection during his short stay in Carlingford, which was a kind of popularity not much to the taste of the Churchman. But Mr Wentworth had a certain faculty of concentrating his thoughts into the tersest expression, and of uttering in a very few words, as if they did not mean anything particular, ideas which were always individual, and often of distinct originality—a kind of utterance which is very dear to the English mind. As was natural, there were but a limited amount of people able to find him out ; but those who did so were rather fond of talking about the “restrained power” of the Curate of St Roque’s.

Next morning was a glorious summer Sunday—one of those days of peace on which this tired old earth takes back her look of innocence,

and deludes herself with thoughts of Eden. To be sure, there were tumults enough going on over her surface—vulgar merry-makings and noises, French drums beating, all kinds of discordant sounds going on here and there, by land and sea, under that tranquil impartial sun. But the air was very still in Carlingford, where you could hear the bees in the lime blossoms as you went to church in the sunshine. All that world of soft air in which the embowered houses of Grange Lane lay beatified, was breathing sweet of the limes ; but notwithstanding the radiance of the day, people were talking of other subjects as they came down under the shadow of the garden-walls to St Roque's. There was a great stream of people—greater than usual ; for Carlingford was naturally anxious to see how Mr Wentworth would conduct himself in such an emergency. On one side of the way Mr Wodehouse's hospitable house, shut up closely, and turning all its shuttered windows to the light, which shone serenely indifferent upon the blank frames, stood silent, dumbly contributing its great moral to the human holiday ; and on the other, Elsworthy's closed shop, with the blinds drawn over the cheerful windows above, where little Rosa once amused herself watching the

passengers, interposed a still more dreadful discordance. The Carlingford people talked of both occurrences with composure as they went to St Roque's. They were sorry, and shocked, and very curious ; but that wonderful moral atmosphere of human indifference and self-regard which surrounds every individual soul, kept their feelings quite within bounds. Most people wondered much what Mr Wentworth would say ; whether he would really venture to face the Carlingford world ; whether he would take refuge in a funeral sermon for Mr Wodehouse ; or how it was possible for him to conduct himself under such circumstances. When the greater part of the congregation was seated, Miss Leonora Wentworth, all by herself, in her iron-grey silk, which rustled like a breeze along the narrow passage, although she wore no crinoline, went up to a seat immediately in front, close to Mr Wentworth's choristers, who just then came trooping in in their white surplices, looking like angels of unequal height, and equivocal reputation. Miss Leonora placed herself in the front row of a little group of benches arranged at the side, just where the Curate's wife would have been placed had he possessed such an appendage. She looked down

blandly upon the many lines of faces turned towards her, accepting their inspection with perfect composure. Though her principles were Evangelical, Miss Leonora was still a Wentworth, and a woman. She had not shown any sympathy for her nephew on the previous night; but she had made up her mind to stand by him, without saying anything about her determination. This incident made a great impression on the mind of Carlingford. Most likely it interfered with the private devotions, from which a few heads popped up abruptly as she passed ; but she was very devout and exemplary in her own person, and set a good example, as became the clergyman's aunt.

Excitement rose very high in St Roque's when Mr Wentworth came into the reading-desk, and Elsworthy, black as a cloud, became visible underneath. The clerk had not ventured to absent himself, nor to send a substitute in his place. Never, in the days when he was most devoted to Mr Wentworth, had Elsworthy been more determined to accompany him through every particular of the service. They had stood together in the little vestry, going through all the usual preliminaries, the Curate trying hard to talk as if nothing had happened,

the clerk going through all his duties in total silence. Perhaps there never was a church service in Carlingford which was followed with such intense interest by all the eyes and ears of the congregation. When the sermon came, it took Mr Wentworth's admirers by surprise, though they could not at the moment make out what it was that puzzled them. Somehow the perverse manner in which for once the Curate treated that wicked man who is generally made so much of in sermons, made his hearers slightly ashamed of themselves. As for Miss Leonora, though she could not approve of his sentiments, the thought occurred to her that Frank was not nearly so like his mother's family as she had supposed him to be. When the service was over, she kept her place, steadily watching all the worshippers out, who thronged out a great deal more hastily than usual to compare notes, and ask each other what they thought. "I can't fancy he looks guilty," an eager voice here and there kept saying over and over. But on the whole, after they had got over the momentary impression made by his presence and aspect, the opinion of Carlingford remained unchanged; which was—that, notwithstanding all the evidence of his previous

life, it was quite believable that Mr Wentworth was a seducer and a villain, and ought to be brought to condign punishment ; but that in the mean time it was very interesting to watch the progress of this startling little drama, and that he himself, instead of merely being the Curate of St Roque's, had become a most captivating enigma, and had made church-going itself half as good as a play.

As for Miss Leonora, she waited for her nephew, and, when he was ready, took his arm and walked with him up Grange Lane to her own door, where they encountered Miss Wentworth and Miss Dora returning from church, and overwhelmed them with astonishment. But it was not about his own affairs that they talked. Miss Leonora did not say a word to her nephew about himself. She was talking of Gerald most of the time, and inquiring into all the particulars of the Squire's late "attack." And she would very fain have found out what Jack's motive was in coming to Carlingford ; but as for Rosa Elsworthy and her concerns, the strong-minded woman ignored them completely. Mr Wentworth even went with her to lunch, on her urgent invitation ; and it was from his aunt's house that he took his way to

Wharfside, pausing at the green door to ask after the Miss Wodehouses, who were, John said with solemnity, as well as could be expected. They were alone, and they did not feel equal to seeing anybody—even Mr Wentworth; and the Perpetual Curate, who would have given all he had in the world for permission to soothe Lucy in her sorrow, went away sadly from the hospitable door, which was now for the first time closed to him. He could not go to Wharfside, to “the district” through which they had so often gone together, about which they had talked, when all the little details discussed were sweet with the love which they did not name, without going deeper and deeper into that sweet shadow of Lucy which was upon his way wherever he went. He could not help missing her voice when the little choir, which was so feeble without her, sang the Magnificat, which, somehow, Mr Wentworth always associated with her image. He read the same sermon to the Wharfside people which he had preached in St Roque’s, and saw, with a little surprise, that it drew tears from the eyes of his more open-hearted hearers, who did not think of the proprieties. He could see their hands stealing up to their faces, and a great deal of persistent

winking on the part of the stronger members of the congregation. At the close of the service Tom Burrows came up to the Curate with a downcast countenance. "Please, sir, if I've done ye injustice in my own mind, as went sore against the grain, and wouldn't have happened but for the women, I axes your pardon," said the honest bargeman, which was balm and consolation to Mr Wentworth. There was much talk in Prickett's Lane on the subject as he went to see the sick woman in No. 10. "There ain't no doubt as he sets our duty before us clear," said one family mother; "he don't leave the men no excuse for their goings-on. He all but named the Bargeman's Arms out plain, as it was the place all the mischief came from." "If he'd have married Miss Lucy, like other folks, at Easter," said one of the brides whom Mr Wentworth had blessed, "such wicked stories couldn't never have been made up." "A story may be made up, or it mayn't be made up," said a more experienced matron; "but it can't be put out of the world unbeknowst no more nor a babby. I don't believe in stories getting up that ain't true. I don't say as he don't do his duty; but things was different in Mr Bury's time, as was the real Rector; and, as I was a-saying, a tale's

like a babby—it may come when it didn't ought to come, or when it ain't wanted, but you can't do away with it, anyhow as you like to try." Mr Wentworth did not hear this dreary prediction as he went back again into the upper world. He was in much better spirits, on the whole. He had calmed his own mind and moved the hearts of others, which is to every man a gratification, even though nothing higher should be involved. And he had regained the moral countenance of Tom Burrows, which most of all was a comfort to him. More than ever he longed to go and tell Lucy as he passed by the green door. Tom Burrows's repentant face recalled Mr Wentworth's mind to the fact that a great work was doing in Wharfside, which, after all, was more worth thinking of than any tantalising vision of an impossible benefice. But this very thought, so consoling in itself, reminded him of all his vexations, of the public inquiry into his conduct which was hanging over him, and of his want of power to offer to Lucy the support and protection of which she might so soon stand in need ; and having thus drawn upon his head once more his whole burden of troubles, Mr Wentworth went in to eat his dinner with what appetite he could.

The Perpetual Curate sat up late that night, as indeed was his custom. He sat late, hearing, as everybody does who sits up alone in a hushed and sleeping household, a hundred fantastic creaks and sounds which did not mean anything, and of which he took no notice. Once, indeed, when it was nearly midnight, he fancied he heard the garden-gate close hurriedly, but explained it to himself as people do when they prefer not to give themselves trouble. About one o'clock in the morning, however, Mr Wentworth could no longer be in any doubt that some stealthy step was passing his door and moving about the house. He was not alarmed, for Mrs Hadwin had occasional "attacks," like most people of her age ; but he put down his pen and listened. No other sound was to be heard except this stealthy step, no opening of doors, nor whisper of voices, nor commotion of any kind ; and after a while Mr Wentworth's curiosity was fully awakened. When he heard it again, he opened his door suddenly, and threw a light upon the staircase and little corridor into which his room opened. The figure he saw there startled him more than if it had been a midnight robber. It was only Sarah, the housemaid, white and shivering with terror, who fell down upon her

knees before him. "Oh, Mr Wentworth, it ain't my fault!" cried Sarah. The poor girl was only partially dressed, and trembled pitifully. "They'll say it was my fault; and oh, sir, it's my character I'm a-thinking of," said Sarah, with a sob; and the Curate saw behind her the door of Wodehouse's room standing open, and the moonlight streaming into the empty apartment. "I daren't go down-stairs to see if he's took anything," cried poor Sarah, under her breath; "there might be more of them about the place. But oh, Mr Wentworth, if Missis finds out as I gave him the key, what will become of me?" Naturally, it was her own danger which had most effect upon Sarah. Her full, good-humoured face was all wet and stained with crying, her lips quivering, her eyes dilated. Perhaps a thrill of private disappointment mingled with her dread of losing her character. "He used to tell me all as he was a-going to do," said Sarah; "but oh, sir, he's been and gone away, and I daren't go down-stairs to look at the plate, and I'll never more sleep in quiet, if I was to live a century. It ain't as I care for *him*, but it's the key and my character as I'm a-thinking of," cried the poor girl, bursting into audible sobs that could be restrained no longer. Mr Went-

worth took a candle and went into Wodehouse's empty room, leaving her to recover her composure. Everything was cleared and packed up in that apartment. The little personal property he had, the shabby boots and worn habiliments, had disappeared totally ; even the rubbish of wood-carving on his table was cleared away. Not a trace that he had been there a few hours ago remained in the place. The Curate came out of the room with an anxious countenance, not knowing what to make of it. And by this time Sarah's sobs had roused Mrs Hadwin, who stood, severe and indignant, at her own door in her nightcap, to know what was the matter. Mr Wentworth retired into his own apartments after a word of explanation, leaving the mistress and maid to fight it out. He himself was more disturbed and excited than he could have described. He could not tell what this new step meant, but felt instinctively that it denoted some new development in the tangled web of his own fortunes. Some hidden danger seemed to him to be gathering in the air over the house of mourning, of which he had constituted himself a kind of guardian. He could not sleep all night, but kept starting at every sound, thinking now that the skulking rascal, who was

Lucy's brother, was coming back, and now that his departure was only a dream. Mr Wentworth's restlessness was not soothed by hearing all the night through, in the silence of the house, suppressed sobs and sounds of weeping proceeding from the attic overhead, which poor Sarah shared with her fellow-servant. Perhaps the civilities of "the gentleman" had dazzled Sarah, and been too much for her peace of mind ; perhaps it was only her character, as the poor girl said. But as often as the Curate started from his uneasy and broken snatches of sleep, he heard the murmur of crying and consoling up-stairs. Outside the night was spreading forth those sweetest unseen glories of the starlight and the moonlight and the silence, which Nature reserves for her own enjoyment, when the weary human creatures are out of the way and at rest ;—and Jack Wentworth slept the sleep of the righteous, uttering delicate little indications of the depth of his slumber, which it would have been profane to call by any vulgar name. *He* slept sweetly while his brother watched and longed for daylight, impatient for the morrow which must bring forth something new. The moonlight streamed full into the empty room, and made mysterious combina-

tions of the furniture, and chased the darkness into corners which each held their secret. This was how Mrs Hadwin's strange lodger, whom nobody could ever make out, disappeared as suddenly as he had come, without any explanations ; and only a very few people could ever come to understand what he had to do with the after-events which struck Grange Lane dumb, and turned into utter confusion all the ideas and conclusions of society in Carlingford.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"I WILL do what I can for you," said Mr Morgan ; "yours is a very hard case, as you say. Of course, it would not do for me to give any opinion—but such a thing shall not occur in Carlingford, while I am here, without being looked into," said the Rector, with dignity ; "of that you may be sure."

"I don't want no more nor justice," said Elsworthy—"no more nor justice. I'm a man as has always been respected, and never interfered with nobody as didn't interfere with me. The things I've stood from my clergyman, I wouldn't have stood from no man living. The way as he'd talk, sir, of them as was a deal better than himself ! We was a happy family afore Mr Wentworth came nigh of us. Most folks in Carlingford knows me. There wasn't a more industrious family in Carlingford, though

I say it as shouldn't, nor one as was more content, or took things more agreeable, afore Mr Wentworth come to put all wrong."

"Mr Wentworth has been here for five years," said the Rector's wife, who was present at this interview; "have things been going wrong for all that time?"

"I couldn't describe to nobody what I've put up with," said the clerk of St Roque's, evading the question. "He hadn't the ways of such clergymen as I've been used to. Twice the pay wouldn't have made up for what I've suffered in my feelins ; and I ask you, sir, is this how it's all to end ? My little girl's gone," cried Elsworthy, rising into hoarse earnestness —"my little girl as was so sweet, and as everybody took notice on. She's gone, and I don't know as I'll ever see her again ; and I can't get no satisfaction one way or another ; and I ask you, sir, is a villain as could do such a thing to hold up his head in the town, and go on the same as ever ? I ain't a man as is contrary, or as goes again' my superiors ; but it's driving me mad, that's what it's doing," said Elsworthy, wiping the moisture from his forehead. The man was trembling and haggard, changed even in his looks—his eyes were red with passion

and watching, and looked like the eyes of a wild beast lying in wait for its prey. "I can't say as I've ever slept an hour since it happened," he cried; "and as for my missis, it's a-killing of her. We ain't shut up, because we've got to live all the same ; and because, if the poor thing come back, there's always an open door. But I'll have justice, if I was to die for it!" cried Elsworthy. "I don't ask no more than justice. If it ain't to be had one way, I'll have it another. I'll set the police on him—I will. When a man's drove wild, he ain't answerable for what he's a-doing ; and to see him a-walking about Carlingford, and a-holding up his head, is a thing as I won't stand no longer, not if it was to be my ruin. I'm as good as ruined now, and I don't care." He broke off short with these words, and sat down abruptly on the chair Thomas had placed for him in front of the Rector's table. Up to this moment he had been standing, in his vehemence and agitation, without taking advantage of the courtesy accorded to his misfortune ; now the poor man sat down by way of emphasis, and began to polish his hat round and round with his trembling hands.

As for Mr Morgan, he, on the contrary, got

up and walked instinctively to the fireplace, and stood there with his back to the empty grate, contemplating the world in general with a troubled countenance, as was natural. Not to speak of his prejudice against Mr Wentworth, the Rector was moved by the sight of Elsworthy's distress ; but then his wife, who unluckily had brought her needlework into the library on this particular morning, and who was in the interest of the Curate of St Roque's, was seated watchful by the window, occasionally looking up, and entirely cognisant, as Mr Morgan was aware, of everything that happened. The Rector was much embarrassed to feel himself thus standing between the two parties. "Yours is a very hard case—but it is necessary to proceed with caution, for, after all, there is not much proof," he said, faltering a little. "My dear, it is a pity to detain you from your walk," Mr Morgan continued, after a momentary pause, and looked with a flush of consciousness at his wife, whose absence would have been such a relief to him. Mrs Morgan looked up with a gracious smile.

" You are not detaining me, William—I am very much interested," said the designing woman, and immediately began to arrange and put in order what the Rector knew by

experience to be a long piece of work, likely to last her an hour at least. Mr Morgan uttered a long breath, which sounded like a little snort of despair.

"It is very difficult to know what to do," said the Rector, shifting uneasily upon the hearthrug, and plunging his hands into the depths of his pockets. "If you could name anybody you would like to refer it to—but being a brother clergyman——"

"A man as conducts himself like that, didn't ought to be a clergyman, sir," cried Elsworthy. "I'm one as listened to him preaching on Sunday, and could have jumped up and dragged him out of the pulpit, to hear him a-discoursing as if he wasn't a bigger sinner nor any there. I ain't safe to stand it another Sunday. I'd do something as I should be sorry for after. I'm asking justice, and no more." With these words Elsworthy got up again, still turning round in his hands the unlucky hat, and turned his person, though not his eyes, towards Mrs Morgan. "No man could be more partial to his clergyman nor I was," he said, hoarsely. "There was never a time as I wasn't glad to see him. He came in and out as if it belonged to him, and I had no more thought as he was meaning any

harm than the babe unborn ; but a man as meddles with an innocent girl ain't nothing but a black-hearted villain ! ” cried Elsworthy, with a gleam out of his red eyes ; “ and I don’t believe as anybody would take his part as knew all. I put my confidence in the Rector, as is responsible for the parish,” he went on, facing round again : “ not to say but what it’s natural for them as are Mr Wentworth’s friends to take his part—but I’ll have justice, wherever it comes from. It’s hard work to go again’ any lady as I’ve a great respect for, and wouldn’t cross for the world ; but it ain’t in reason that I should be asked to bear it and not say nothing ; and I’ll have justice, if I should die for it,” said Elsworthy. He turned from one to another as he spoke, but kept his eyes upon his hat, which he smoothed and smoothed as if his life depended on it. But for the reality of his excitement, his red eyes, and hoarse voice, he would have been a ludicrous figure, standing as he did in the middle of Mr Morgan’s library, veering round, first to one side and then to the other, with his stooping head and ungainly person. As for the Rector, he too kept looking at his wife with a very troubled face.

“ It is difficult for me to act against a brother

clergyman," said Mr Morgan ; "but I am very sorry for you, Elsworthy—very sorry ; if you could name, say, half-a-dozen gentlemen——"

"But don't you think," said the Rector's wife, interposing, "that you should inquire first whether there is any evidence ? It would make you all look very ridiculous if you got up an inquiry and found no proof against Mr Wentworth. Is it likely he would do such a thing all at once without showing any signs of wickedness beforehand—is it possible ? To be sorry is quite a different thing, but I don't see——"

"Ladies don't understand such matters," said the Rector, who had been kept at bay so long that he began to get desperate. "I beg your pardon, my dear, but it is not a matter for you to discuss. We shall take good care that there is plenty of evidence," said the perplexed man—"I mean, before we proceed to do anything," he added, growing very red and confused. When Mr Morgan caught his wife's acute eye, he got as nearly into a passion as was possible for so good a man. "You know what I mean," he said, in his peremptory way ; "and, my dear, you will forgive me for saying this is not a matter to be discussed before a lady." When

he had uttered this bold speech, the Rector took a few little walks up and down the room, not caring, however, to look at his wife. He was ashamed of the feeling he had that her absence would set him much more at his ease with Elsworthy, but still could not help being conscious that it was so. He did not say anything more, but he walked up and down the room with sharp short steps, and betrayed his impatience very manifestly. As for Mrs Morgan, who was a sensible woman, she saw that the time had come for her to retire from the field.

“I think the first thing to be done is to try every possible means of finding the girl,” she said, getting up from her seat; “but I have no doubt what you decide upon will be the best. You will find me in the drawing-room when you want me, William.” Perhaps her absence for the first moment was not such a relief to her husband as he had expected. The mildness of her parting words made it very apparent that she did not mean to take offence; and he perceived suddenly, at a glance, that he would have to tell her all he was going to do, and encounter her criticism single-handed, which was rather an appalling prospect to the Rector. Mrs Morgan, for her part, went up-stairs not

without a little vexation, certainly, but with a comforting sense of the opportunity which awaited her. She felt that, in his unprotected position, as soon as she left him, the Rector would conduct himself rashly, and that her time was still to come.

The Rector went back to the hearthrug when his wife left the room, but in the heat of his own personal reflections he did not say anything to Elsworthy, who still stood smoothing his hat in his hand. On the whole, Mr Morgan was rather aggravated for the moment by the unlucky cause of this little encounter, and was not half so well disposed towards Mr Wentworth's enemy as half an hour before, when he recognised his wife as the champion of the Curate, and felt controlled by her presence ; for the human and even the clerical mind has its impulses of perversity. He began to get very impatient of Elsworthy's hat, and the persistent way in which he worked at it with his hands.

"I suppose you would not be so certain about it, if you had not satisfactory evidence ?" he said, turning abruptly, and even a little angrily, upon the suppliant ; for Mr Morgan naturally resented his own temper and the little

semi-quarrel he had got into upon the third person who was the cause of all.

"Sir," said Elsworthy, with eagerness, "it ain't no wonder to me as the lady takes Mr Wentworth's part. A poor man don't stand no chance against a young gentleman as has had every advantage. It's a thing as I'm prepared for, and it don't have no effect upon me. A lady as is so respected and thought a deal of both in town and country——"

"I was not speaking of my wife," said the Rector, hastily. "Don't you think you had better put down your hat? I think you said it was on Friday it occurred. It will be necessary to take down the facts in a business-like way," said Mr Morgan, drawing his chair towards the table and taking up his pen. This was how the Rector was occupied when Thomas announced the most unexpected of all possible visitors, Mr Proctor, who had been Mr Morgan's predecessor in Carlingford. Thomas announced his old master with great solemnity as "the late Rector"—a title which struck the present incumbent with a sense of awe not unnatural in the circumstances. He jumped up from his chair and let his pen fall out of his startled fingers when his old friend came in. They had

eaten many a good dinner together in the revered hall of All-Souls, and as the familiar countenance met his eyes, perhaps a regretful thought of that Elysium stole across the mind of the late Fellow, who had been so glad to leave the sacred brotherhood, and marry, and become as other men. He gave but a few hurried words of surprise and welcome to his visitor, and then, with a curious counterpoise of sentiment, sent him up-stairs to see "my wife," feeling, even while half envious of him, a kind of superiority and half contempt for the man who was not a Rector and married, but had given up both these possibilities. When he sent him up-stairs to see "my wife," Mr Morgan looked after the elderly celibate with a certain pity. One always feels more inclined to take the simple view of any matter—to stand up for injured innocence, and to right the wronged—when one feels one's self better off than one's neighbours. A reverse position is apt to detract from the simplicity of one's conceptions, and to suggest two sides to the picture. When Mr Proctor was gone, the Rector addressed himself with great devotion to Elsworthy and his evidence. It could not be doubted, at least, that the man was in earnest, and believed what

he said ; and things unquestionably looked rather ugly for Mr Wentworth. Mr Morgan took down all about the Curate's untimely visit to Elsworthy on the night when he took Rosa home ; and when he came to the evidence of the Miss Hemmings, who had seen the Curate talking to the unfortunate little girl at his own door the last time she was seen in Carlingford, the Rector shook his head with a prolonged movement, half of satisfaction, half of regret ; for, to be sure, he had made up his mind beforehand who the culprit was, and it was to a certain extent satisfactory to have his opinion confirmed.

"This looks very bad, very bad, I am sorry to say," said Mr Morgan ; "for the unhappy young man's own sake, an investigation is absolutely necessary. As for you, Elsworthy, everybody must be sorry for you. Have you no idea where he could have taken the poor girl?—that is," said the incautious Rector, "supposing that he is guilty—of which, I am afraid, there does not seem much doubt."

"There ain't no doubt," said Elsworthy ; "there ain't nobody else as could have done it. Just afore my little girl was took away, sir, Mr Wentworth went off of a sudden, and it was

said as he was a-going home to the Hall. I was a-thinking of sending a letter anonymous, to ask if it was known what he was after. I read in the papers the other day as his brother was a-going over to Rome. There don't seem to be none o' them the right sort ; which it's terrible for two clergymen. I was thinking of dropping a bit of a note anonymous——”

“No—no—no,” said the Rector, “that would never do ; nothing of that sort, Elsworthy. If you thought it likely she was there, the proper thing would be to go and inquire ; nothing anonymous—no, no ; that is a thing I could not possibly countenance,” said Mr Morgan. He pushed away his pen and paper, and got very red and uncomfortable. If either of the critics up-stairs, his wife, or his predecessor in the Rectory, could but know that he was having an anonymous letter suggested to him—that anybody ventured to think him capable of being an accomplice in such a proceeding ! The presence of these two in the house, though they were most probably at the moment engaged in the calmest abstract conversation, and totally unaware of what was going on in the library, had a great effect upon the Rector. He felt insulted that any man could venture to confide

such an intention to him almost within the hearing of his wife. "If I am to take up your case, everything must be open and straightforward," said Mr Morgan; while Elsworthy, who saw he had said something amiss, without precisely understanding what, took up his hat as a resource, and once more began to polish it round and round in his hands.

"I didn't mean no harm, sir, I'm sure," he said; "I don't seem to see no other way o' finding out; for I ain't like a rich man as can go and come as he pleases; but I won't say no more, since it's displeasing to you. If you'd give me the list of names, sir, as you have decided on to be the committee, I wouldn't trouble you no longer, seeing as you've got visitors. Perhaps, if the late Rector ain't going away directly, he would take it kind to be put on the committee; and he's a gentleman as I've a great respect for, though he wasn't not to say the man for Carlingford," said Elsworthy, with a sidelong look. He began to feel the importance of his own position as the originator of a committee, and at the head of the most exciting movement which had been for a long time in Carlingford, and could not help being sensible, notwithstanding his affliction, that he had a

distinction to offer which even the late Rector might be pleased to accept.

"I don't think Mr Proctor will stay," said Mr Morgan ; "and if he does stay, I believe he is a friend of Mr Wentworth's." It was only after he had said this that the Rector perceived the meaning of the words he had uttered ; then, in his confusion and vexation, he got up hastily from the table, and upset the inkstand in the embarrassment of the moment. "Of course, that is all the greater reason for having his assistance," said Mr Morgan in his perplexity ; "we are all friends of Mr Wentworth. Will you have the goodness to ring the bell ? There are few things more painful than to take steps against a brother clergyman, if one did not hope it would be for his benefit in the end. Oh, never mind the table. Be so good as to ring the bell again—louder, please."

"There ain't nothing equal to blotting-paper, sir," said Elsworthy, eagerly. "With a bit o' blotting-paper I'd undertake to rub out ink-stains out o' the finest carpet—if you'll permit me. It ain't but a small speck, and it'll be gone afore you could look round. It's twenty times better nor lemon-juice, or them poisonous salts as you're always nervous of leaving about.

Look you here, sir, if it ain't a-sopping up beautiful. There ain't no harm done as your respected lady could be put out about ; and I'll take the list with me, if you please, to show to my wife, as is a-breaking her heart at home, and can't believe as we'll ever get justice. She says as how the quality always takes a gentleman's part against us poor folks, but that ain't been my experience. Don't you touch the carpet, Thomas—there ain't a speck to be seen when the blotting-paper's cleared away. I'll go home, not to detain you no more, sir, and cheer up the poor heart as is a-breaking," said Elsworthy, getting up from his knees where he had been operating upon the carpet. He had got in his hand the list of names which Mr Morgan had put down as referees in this painful business, and it dawned faintly upon the Rector for the moment that he himself was taking rather an undignified position as Elsworthy's partisan.

"I have no objection to your showing it to your wife," said Mr Morgan ; "but I shall be much displeased if I hear any talk about it, Elsworthy ; and I hope it is not revenge you are thinking of, which is a very unchristian sentiment," said the Rector, severely, "and not likely to afford comfort either to her or you."

"No, sir, nothing but justice," said Elsworthy, hoarsely, as he backed out of the room. Notwithstanding this statement, it was with very unsatisfactory sensations that Mr Morgan went up-stairs. He felt somehow as if the justice which Elsworthy demanded, and which he himself had solemnly declared to be pursuing the Curate of St Roque's, was wonderfully like revenge. "All punishment must be more or less vindictive," he said to himself as he went upstairs; but that fact did not make him more comfortable as he went into his wife's drawing-room, where he felt more like a conspirator and assassin than an English Rector in broad daylight, without a mystery near him, had any right to feel. This sensation confused Mr Morgan much, and made him more peremptory in his manner than ever. As for Mr Proctor, who was only a spectator, and felt himself on a certain critical eminence, the suggestion that occurred to his mind was, that he had come in at the end of a quarrel, and that the conjugal firmament was still in a state of disturbance; which idea acted upon some private projects in the hidden mind of the Fellow of All-Souls, and produced a state of feeling little more satisfactory than that of the Rector of Carlingford.

"I hope Mr Proctor is going to stay with us for a day or two," said Mrs Morgan. "I was just saying it must look like coming home to come to the house he used to live in, and which was even furnished to his own taste," said the Rector's wife, shooting a little arrow at the late Rector, of which that good man was serenely unconscious. All this time, while they had been talking, Mrs Morgan had scarcely been able to keep from asking who could possibly have suggested such a carpet. Mr Proctor's chair was placed on the top of one of the big bouquets, which expanded its large foliage round him with more than Eastern prodigality—but was so little conscious of any culpability of his own in the matter, that he had referred his indignant hostess to one of the leaves as an illustration of the kind of diaper introduced into the new window which had lately been put up in the chapel of All-Souls. "A naturalistic treatment, you know," said Mr Proctor, with the utmost serenity; "and some people objected to it," added the unsuspecting man.

"I should have objected very strongly," said Mrs Morgan, with a little flush. "If you call that naturalistic treatment, I consider it perfectly out of place in decoration — of every

kind——” Mr Proctor happened to be looking at her at the moment, and it suddenly occurred to him that Miss Wodehouse never got red in that uncomfortable way, which was the only conclusion he drew from the circumstance, having long ago forgotten that any connection had ever existed between himself and the carpet on the drawing-room in Carlingford Rectory. He addressed his next observation to Mr Morgan, who had just come in.

“I saw Mr Wodehouse’s death in the ‘Times,’ ” said Mr Proctor, “and I thought the poor young ladies might feel—at least they might think it a respect—or, at all events, it would be a satisfaction to one’s self,” said the late Rector, who had got into a mire of explanation. “Though he was far from being a young man, yet having a young daughter like Miss Lucy——”

“Poor Lucy!” said Mr Morgan. “I hope that wretched fellow, young Wentworth”—and here the Rector came to a dead stop, and felt that he had brought the subject most to be avoided head and shoulders into the conversation, as was natural to an embarrassed man. The consequence was that he got angry, as might have been expected. “My dear, you must not look at me as you do. I have just

been hearing all the evidence. No unbiassed mind could possibly come to any other decision," said Mr Morgan, with exasperation. Now that he had committed himself, he thought it was much the best thing to go in for it wholly, without half measures, which was certainly the most straightforward way.

"What has happened to Wentworth?" said Mr Proctor. "He is a young man for whom I have a great regard. Though he is so much younger than I am, he taught me some lessons while I was in Carlingford which I shall never forget. If he is in any trouble that I can help him in, I shall be very glad to do it, both for his own sake and for——" Mr Proctor slurred over the end of his sentence a little, and the others were occupied with their own difficulties, and did not take very much notice—for it was difficult to state fully the nature and extent of Mr Wentworth's enormities after such a declaration of friendship. "I met him on my way here," said the Fellow of All-Souls, "not looking quite as he used to do. I supposed it might be Mr Wodehouse's death, perhaps." All Mr Proctor's thoughts ran in that channel of Mr Wodehouse's death, which, after all, though sad enough, was not so great an event to the com-

munity in general as the late Rector seemed to suppose.

It was Mrs Morgan at length who took heart to explain to Mr Proctor the real state of affairs. "He has been a very good clergyman for five years," said Mrs Morgan; "he might behave foolishly, you know, about Wharfside, but then that was not his fault so much as the fault of the Rector's predecessors. I am sure I beg your pardon, Mr Proctor—I did not mean that you were to blame," said the Rector's wife; "but, notwithstanding all the work he has done, and the consistent life he has led, there is nobody in Carlingford who is not quite ready to believe that he has run away with Rosa Elsworthy—a common little girl, without any education, or a single idea in her head. I suppose she is what you would call pretty," said the indignant woman. "Everybody is just as ready to believe that he is guilty as if he were a stranger or a bad character." Mrs Morgan stopped in an abrupt manner, because her quick eyes perceived a glance exchanged between the two gentlemen. Mr Proctor had seen a good deal of the world in his day, as he was fond of saying now and then to his intimate friends; and he had learned at the university and other places that a girl who is "what

you would call pretty," counts for a great deal in the history of a young man, whether she has any ideas in her head or not. He did not, any more than the people of Carlingford, pronounce at once on *a priori* evidence that Mr Wentworth must be innocent. The Curate's "consistent life" did not go for much in the opinion of the middle-aged Fellow of All-Souls, any more than of the less dignified populace. He said, "Dear me, dear me!" in a most perplexed and distressed tone, while Mrs Morgan kept looking at him; and looked very much as if he were tempted to break forth into lamentations over human nature, as Mr Morgan himself had done.

"I wonder what the Miss Wodehouses think of it," he said at last. "One would do a great deal to keep them from hearing such a thing; but I wonder how they are feeling about it," said Mr Proctor—and clearly declined to discuss the matter with Mrs Morgan, who was counsel for the defence. When the Rector's wife went to her own room to dress for dinner, it is very true that she had a good cry over her cup of tea. She was not only disappointed, but exasperated, in that impatient feminine nature of hers. Perhaps if she had been less sensitive, she would have had less of that redness in her face which

was so great a trouble to Mrs Morgan. These two slow middle-aged men, without any intuitions, who were coming lumbering after her through all kind of muddles of evidence and argument, exasperated the more rapid woman. To be sure, they understood Greek plays a great deal better than she did ; but she was penetrated with the liveliest impatience of their dulness all the same. Mrs Morgan, however, like most people who are in advance of their age, felt her utter impotence against that blank wall of dull resistance. She could not make them see into the heart of things as she did. She had to wait until they had attacked the question in the orthodox way of siege, and made gradual entrance by dint of hard labour. All she could do to console herself, was to shed certain hot tears of indignation and annoyance over her tea, which, however, was excellent tea, and did her good. Perhaps it was to show her sense of superiority, and that she did not feel herself vanquished, that, after that, she put on her new dress, which was very much too nice to be wasted upon Mr Proctor. As for Mr Leeson, who came in as usual just in time for dinner, having heard of Mr Proctor's arrival, she treated him with a blandness which alarmed the

Curate. "I quite expected you, for we have the All-Souls pudding to-day," said the Rector's wife, and she smiled a smile which would have struck awe into the soul of any curate that ever was known in Carlingford.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IT was the afternoon of the same day on which Mr Proctor arrived in Carlingford that Mr Wentworth received the little note from Miss Wodehouse which was so great a consolation to the Perpetual Curate. By that time he had begun to experience humiliations more hard to bear than anything he had yet known. He had received constrained greetings from several of his most cordial friends ; his people in the district, all but Tom Burrows, looked askance upon him ; and Dr Marjoribanks, who had never taken kindly to the young Anglican, had met him with satirical remarks in his dry Scotch fashion, which were intolerable to the Curate. In these circumstances, it was balm to his soul to have his sympathy once more appealed to, and by those who were nearest to his heart. The next day was that appointed for Mr Wodehouse's funeral, to

which Mr Wentworth had been looking forward with a little excitement—wondering, with indignant misery, whether the covert insults he was getting used to would be repeated even over his old friend's grave. It was while this was in his mind that he received Miss Wodehouse's little note. It was very hurriedly written, on the terrible black-edged paper which, to such a simple soul as Miss Wodehouse, it was a kind of comfort to use in the moment of calamity. “Dear Mr Wentworth,” it said, “I am in great difficulty, and don't know what to do: come, I beg of you, and tell me what is best. My dear Lucy insists upon going to-morrow, and I can't cross her when her heart is breaking, and I don't know what to do. Please to come, if it were only for a moment. Dear, dear papa, and all of us, have always had such confidence in you!” Mr Wentworth was seated, very disconsolate, in his study when this appeal came to him: he was rather sick of the world and most things in it; a sense of wrong eclipsed the sunshine for the moment, and obscured the skies; but it was comforting to be appealed to—to have his assistance and his protection sought once more. He took his hat immediately and went up the sunny road, on which there was scarcely a pas-

senger visible, to the closed-up house, which stood so gloomy and irresponsive in the sunshine. Mr Wodehouse had not been a man likely to attract any profound love in his lifetime, or sense of loss when he was gone ; but yet it was possible to think, with the kindly, half-conscious delusion of nature, that had *he* been living, he would have known better ; and the Curate went into the darkened drawing-room, where all the shutters were closed except those of the little window in the corner, where Lucy's work-table stood, and where a little muffled sunshine stole in through the blind. Everything was in terribly good order in the room. The two sisters had been living in their own apartments, taking their forlorn meals in the little parlour which communicated with their sleeping chambers, during this week of darkness ; and nobody had come into the drawing-room, except the stealthy housemaid, who contemplated herself and her new mourning for an hour at a stretch in the great mirror without any interruption, while she made "tidy" the furniture which nobody now disturbed. Into this sombre apartment Miss Wodehouse came gliding, like a gentle ghost, in her black gown. She too, like John and the housemaid and everybody about,

walked and talked under her breath. There was now no man in the house entitled to disturb those proprieties with which a female household naturally hedges round all the great incidents of life ; and the affairs of the family were all carried on in a whisper, in accordance with the solemnity of the occasion—a circumstance which had naturally called the ghost of a smile to the Curate's countenance as he followed John upstairs. Miss Wodehouse herself, though she was pale, and spent half her time, poor soul ! in weeping, and had, besides, living encumbrances to trouble her helpless path, did not look amiss in her black gown. She came in gliding without any noise, but with a little expectation in her gentle countenance. She was one of the people whom experience never makes any wiser ; and she could not help hoping to be delivered from her troubles this time, as so often before, as soon as she should have transferred them to somebody else's shoulders, and taken “advice.”

“ Lucy has made up her mind that we are to go to-morrow,” said Miss Wodehouse, drying her tears. “ It was not the custom in my young days, Mr Wentworth, and I am sure I don't know what to say ; but I can't bear to cross her, now

that she has nobody but me. She was always the best child in the world," said the poor lady—"far more comfort to poor dear papa than I ever could be; but to hear her talk you would think she had never done anything. And oh, Mr Wentworth, if that was all I should not mind; but we have always kept things a secret from her; and now I have had a letter, and I don't know what it is possible to do."

"A letter from your brother?" asked Mr Wentworth, eagerly.

"From Tom," said the elder sister; "poor, poor Tom! I am sure papa forgave him at the last, though he did not say anything. Oh, Mr Wentworth, he was such a nice boy once; and if Lucy only knew, and I could summon up the courage to tell her, and he would change his ways, as he promised—don't think me fickle or changeable, or look as if I didn't know my own mind," cried poor Miss Wodehouse, with a fresh flow of tears; but oh, Mr Wentworth, if he only would change his ways, as he promised, think what a comfort it would be to us to have him at home!"

"Yes," said the Curate, with a little bitterness. Here was another instance of the impunitics of wickedness. "I think it very likely

indeed that you will have him at home," said Mr Wentworth—"almost certain; the wonder is that he went away. Will you tell me where he dates his letter from? I have a curiosity to know."

"You are angry," said the anxious sister. "Oh, Mr Wentworth, I know he does not deserve anything else, but you have always been so kind. I put his letter in my pocket to show you—at least, I am sure I intended to put it in my pocket. We have scarcely been in this room since—since—" and here Miss Wodehouse broke down, and had to take a little time to recover. "I will go and get the letter," she said, as at last she regained her voice, and hurried away through the partial darkness with her noiseless step, and the long black garments which swept noiselessly over the carpet. Mr Wentworth for his part went to the one window which was only veiled by a blind, and comforted himself a little in the sunshine. The death atmosphere weighed upon the young man and took away his courage. If he was only wanted to pave the way for the reception of the rascally brother for whose sins he felt convinced he was himself suffering, the consolation of being appealed to would be sensibly lessened, and it was hard to have no

other way of clearing himself than by criminating Lucy's brother, and bringing dishonour upon her name. While he waited for Miss Wodehouse's return, he stood by Lucy's table with very little of the feeling which had once prompted him to fold his arms so caressingly with an impulse of tenderness upon the chair which stood beside it. He was so much absorbed in his own thoughts that he did not hear at first the sound of a hesitating hand upon the door, which at length, when repeated, went to the Curate's heart. He turned round rapidly, and saw Lucy standing on the threshold in her profound mourning. She was very pale, and her blue eyes looked large and full beyond their natural appearance, dilated with tears and watching ; and when they met those of Mr Wentworth, they filled full like flower-cups with dew ; but besides this Lucy made no demonstration of her grief. After that momentary hesitation at the door, she came in and gave the Curate her hand. Perhaps it was a kind of defiance, perhaps a natural yearning, which drew her out of her chamber when she heard of his presence ; both sentiments sprang out of the same feeling ; and the Curate, when he looked at her, bethought himself of the only moment when he had been

able to imagine that Lucy loved him ; that moment by her father's bedside, of which the impression had been dulled since then by a crowd of events, when she looked with such reproach and disappointment and indignation into his face.

"I heard you were here," said Lucy, "and I thought you might think it strange not to see us both." And then she paused, perhaps finding it less easy than she thought to explain why she had come. "We ought to thank you, Mr Wentworth, for your kindness, though I——"

"You were angry with me," said the Curate. "I know you thought me heartless ; but a man must bear to be misconceived when he has duty to do," the young clergyman added, with a swelling heart. Lucy did not know the fuller signification of his words ; and there was a loftiness in them which partly affronted her, and set all her sensitive woman-pride in arms against him.

"I beg your pardon," she said, faltering, and then the two stood beside each other in silence, with a sense of estrangement. As for Lucy, all the story about Rosa Elsworthy, of which she had not yet heard the last chapter, rushed back upon her mind. Was it to see little Rosa's lover that she had come out of the darkness of her

room, with a natural longing for sympathy which it was impossible to restrain? The tenderness of the instinctive feeling which had moved her, went back upon her heart in bitterness. That he must have divined why she had come, and scorned her for it, was the mildest supposition in Lucy's mind. She could almost have imagined that he had come on purpose to elicit this vain exhibition of regard, and triumph over it; all this, too, when she was in such great trouble and sorrow, and wanted a little compassion, a little kindness, so much. This was the state of mind to which Lucy had come, in five minutes after she entered the room, when Miss Wodehouse came back with the letter. The elder sister was almost as much astonished at Lucy's presence as if she had been the dead inhabitant who kept such state in the darkened house. She was so startled that she went back a step or two when she perceived her, and hastily put the letter in her pocket, and exclaimed her sister's name in a tone most unlike Miss Wodehouse's natural voice.

"I came down-stairs because—I mean they told me Mr Wentworth was here," said Lucy, who had never felt so weak and so miserable in her life, "and I wanted to thank him for all his

kindness." It was here for the first time that Lucy broke down. Her sorrow was so great, her longing for a word of kindness had been so natural, and her shame and self-condemnation at the very thought that she was able to think of anything but her father, were so bitter, that the poor girl's forces, weakened by watching, were not able to withstand them. She sank into the chair that stood nearest, and covered her face with her hands, and cried as people cry only at twenty. And as for Mr Wentworth, he had no right to take her in his arms and comfort her, nor to throw himself at her feet and entreat her to take courage. All he could do was to stand half a yard, yet a whole world, apart looking at her, his heart beating with all the remorseful half-angry tenderness of love. Since it was not his to console her, he was almost impatient of her tears.

"Dear, I have been telling Mr Wentworth about to-morrow," said Miss Wodehouse, weeping too, as was natural, "and he thinks—he thinks—oh, my darling! and so do I—that it will be too much for you. When I was young it never was the custom; and oh, Lucy, remember that ladies are not to be expected to have such command over their feelings," said poor

Miss Wodehouse, dropping on her knees by Lucy's chair. Mr Wentworth stood looking on in a kind of despair. He had nothing to say, and no right to say anything ; even his presence was a kind of intrusion. But to be referred to thus as an authority against Lucy's wishes, vexed him in the most unreasonable way.

"Mr Wentworth does not know me," said Lucy, under her breath, wiping away her tears with a trembling, indignant hand. "If we had had a brother, it might have been different ; but there must be somebody there that loves him," said the poor girl, with a sob, getting up hastily from her chair. She could not bear to stay any longer in the room, which she had entered with a vague sense of possible consolation. As for the Curate, he made haste to open the door for her, feeling the restraint of his position almost intolerable. "*I shall be there,*" he said, stopping at the door to look into the fair, pallid face which Lucy would scarcely raise to listen. "Could you not trust *me*?" It looked like giving him a pledge of something sacred and precious to put her hand into his, which was held out for it so eagerly. But Lucy could not resist the softening of nature ; and not even Miss Wodehouse, looking anxiously after them,

heard what further words they were that Mr Wentworth said in her ear. "I am for your service, however and wherever you want me," said the Curate, with a young man's absolutism. Heaven knows he had enough to do with his own troubles ; but he remembered no obstacle which could prevent him from dedicating all his time and life to her as he spoke. When Lucy reached her own room, she threw herself upon the sofa, and wept like a woman inconsolable ; but it was somehow because this consolation, subtle and secret, had stolen into her heart that her tears flowed so freely. And Mr Wentworth returned to her sister relieved, he could not have told why. At all events, come what might, the two had drawn together again in their mutual need.

"Oh, Mr Wentworth, how can I cross her ?" said Miss Wodehouse, wringing her hands. "If we had a brother—did you hear what she said ? Here is his letter, and I hope you will tell me candidly what you think. If we could trust him—if we could but trust him ! I daresay you think me very changeable and foolish ; but now we are alone," said the poor lady, "think what a comfort it would be if he only would change his ways as he promised ! Lucy is a

great deal more use than I am, and understands things ; but still we are only two women," said the elder sister. "If you think we could put any dependence upon him, Mr Wentworth, I would never hesitate. He might live with us, and have his little allowance." Miss Wodehouse paused, and raised her anxious face to the Curate, pondering the particulars of the liberality she intended. "He is not a boy," she went on. "I daresay now he must feel the want of the little comforts he once was used to ; and though he is not like what he used to be, neither in his looks nor his manners, people would be kind to him for our sakes. Oh, Mr Wentworth, don't you think we might trust him ?" said the anxious woman, looking in the Curate's face.

All this time Mr Wentworth, with an impatience of her simplicity which it was difficult to restrain, was reading the letter, in which he perceived a very different intention from any divined by Miss Wodehouse. The billet was disreputable enough, written in pencil, and without any date.

"MARY,—I mean to come to my father's funeral," wrote Mr Wodehouse's disowned son.

"Things are changed now, as I said they would be. I and a friend of mine have set everything straight with Waters, and I mean to come in my own name, and take the place I have a right to. How it is to be after this depends on how you behave ; but things are changed between you and me, as I told you they would be ; and I expect you won't do anything to make 'em worse by doing or saying what's unpleasant. I add no more, because I hope you'll have sense to see what I mean, and to act accordingly.—
Your brother, THOMAS WODEHOUSE."

"You see he thinks I will reproach him," said Miss Wodehouse, anxiously ; perhaps it had just glanced across her own mind that something more important still might have dictated language so decided. "He has a great deal more feeling than you would suppose, poor fellow ! It is very touching in him to say, 'the place he has a right to'—don't you think so, Mr Wentworth ? Poor Tom ! if we could but trust him, and he would change his ways as he promised ! Oh, Mr Wentworth, don't you think I might speak of it to him to-morrow ? If we could—bury—everything—in dear papa's grave," cried the poor lady, once more breaking

down. Mr Wentworth took no notice of Miss Wodehouse's tears. They moved him with sentiments entirely different from those with which he regarded Lucy's. He read the note over again without any attempt to console her, till she had struggled back into composure ; but even then there was nothing sympathetic in the Curate's voice.

"And I think you told me you did not know anything about the will ?" he said, with some abruptness, making no account whatever of the suggestion she had made.

"No," said Miss Wodehouse ; "but my dear father was a business man, Mr Wentworth, and I feel quite sure—quite sure——"

"Yes," said the Perpetual Curate ; "nor of the nature of his property, perhaps ?" added the worldly-minded young man whom poor Miss Wodehouse had chosen for her adviser. It was more than the gentle woman could bear.

"Oh, Mr Wentworth, you know I am not one to understand," cried the poor lady. "You ask me questions, but you never tell me what you think I should do. If it were only for myself, I would not mind, but I have to act for Lucy," said the elder sister, suddenly sitting upright and drying her tears. "Papa, I am

sure, did what was best for us," she said, with a little gentle dignity, which brought the Curate back to his senses ; " but oh, Mr Wentworth, look at the letter, and tell me, for my sister's sake, what am I to do ? "

The Curate went to the window, from which the sunshine was stealing away, to consider the subject ; but he did not seem to derive much additional wisdom from that sacred spot, where Lucy's work-table stood idle. " We must wait and see," he said to himself. When he came back to Miss Wodehouse, and saw the question still in her eyes, it only brought back his impatience. " My dear Miss Wodehouse, instead of speculating about what is to happen, it would be much better to prepare your sister for the discovery she must make to-morrow," said Mr Wentworth ; " I cannot give any other advice, for my part. I think it is a great pity that you have kept it concealed so long. I beg your pardon for speaking so abruptly, but I am afraid you don't know all the trouble that is before you. We are all in a great deal of trouble," said the Perpetual Curate, with a little unconscious solemnity. " I can't say I see my way through it ; but you ought to prepare her—to see—her brother." He said

the words with a degree of repugnance which he could not conceal, and which wounded his companion's tender heart.

"He was so different when he was young," said Miss Wodehouse, with a suppressed sob—"he was a favourite everywhere. You would not have looked so if you had known him then. Oh, Mr Wentworth, promise me that you will not turn your back upon him if he comes home, after all your kindness. I will tell Lucy how much you have done for him," said Miss Wodehouse. She was only half-conscious of her own gentle artifice. She took the Curate's hand in both her own before he left her, and said it was such a comfort to have his advice to rely upon; and she believed what she said, though Mr Wentworth himself knew better. The poor lady sat down in Lucy's chair, and had a cry at her ease after he went away. She was to tell Lucy—but how? and she sat pondering this hard question till all the light had faded out of the room, and the little window which was not shuttered dispersed only a grey twilight through the empty place. The lamp, meantime, had been lighted in the little parlour where Lucy sat, very sad, in her black dress, with 'In Memoriam' on the table by

her, carrying on a similar strain in her heart. She was thinking of the past, so many broken scenes of which kept flashing up before her, all bright with indulgent love and tenderness—and she was thinking of the next day, when she was to see all that remained of her good father laid in his grave. He was not very wise nor remarkable among men, but he had been the tenderest father to the child of his old age; and in her heart she was praying for him still, pausing now and then to think whether it was right. The tears were heavy in her young eyes, but they were natural tears, and Lucy had no more thought that there was in the world anything sadder than sorrow, or that any complications lay in her individual lot, than the merest child in Prickett's Lane. She thought of going back to the district, all robed and invested in the sanctity of her grief—she thought it was to last for ever, as one has the privilege of thinking when one is young; and it was to this young saint, tender towards all the world, ready to pity everybody, and to save a whole race, if that had been possible, that Miss Wodehouse went in, heavy and burdened, with her tale of miserable vice, unkindness, estrangement. How

was it possible to begin? Instead of beginning, poor Miss Wodehouse, overpowered by her anxieties and responsibilities, was taken ill and fainted, and had to be carried to bed. Lucy would not let her talk when she came to herself; and so the only moment of possible preparation passed away, and the event itself, which one of them knew nothing of, and the other did not understand, came in its own person, without any *avant-couriers*, to open Lucy's eyes once for all.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MR WENTWORTH had to go into Carlingford on some business when he left Miss Wodehouse; and as he went home again, having his head full of so many matters, he forgot for the moment what most immediately concerned himself, and was close upon Elsworthy's shop, looking into the window, before he thought of it. Elsworthy himself was standing behind the counter, with a paper in his hand, from which he was expounding something to various people in the shop. It was getting late, and the gas was lighted, which threw the interior into very bright relief to Mr Wentworth outside. The Curate was still only a young man, though he was a clergyman, and his movements were not always guided by reason or sound sense. He walked into the shop, almost before he was aware what he was

doing. The people were inconsiderable people enough—cronies of Elsworthy—but they were people who had been accustomed to look up very reverentially to the Curate of St Roque's, and Mr Wentworth was far from being superior to their disapproval. There was a very visible stir among them as he entered, and Elsworthy came to an abrupt stop in his elucidations, and thrust the paper he had been reading into a drawer. Dead and sudden silence followed the entrance of the Curate. Peter Hayles, the druggist, who was one of the auditors, stole to the door with intentions of escape, and the women, of whom there were two or three, looked alarmed, not knowing what might come of it. As for Mr Wentworth, there was only one thing possible for him to say. "Have you heard anything of Rosa, Elsworthy?" he asked, with great gravity, fixing his eyes upon the man's face. The question seemed to ring into all the corners. Whether it was innocence or utter abandonment nobody could tell, and the spectators held their breath for the answer. Elsworthy, for his part, was as much taken by surprise as his neighbours. He grew very pale and livid in his sudden excitement, and lost his voice, and stood star-

ing at the Curate like a man struck dumb. Perhaps Mr Wentworth got bolder when he saw the effect he had produced. He repeated the question, looking towards poor Mrs Elsworthy, who had jumped from her husband's side when he came in. The whole party looked like startled conspirators to Mr Wentworth's eyes, though he had not the least idea what they had been doing. "Have you heard anything of Rosa?" he asked again; and everybody looked at Elsworthy, as if he were the guilty man, and had suborned the rest; which, indeed, in one sense, was not far from being the case.

When Elsworthy came to himself, he gave Mr Wentworth a sidelong dangerous look. "No, sir—nothing," said Rosa's uncle. "Them as has hidden her has hidden her well. I didn't expect to hear not yet," said Elsworthy. Though Mr Wentworth did not know what he meant, his little audience in the shop did, and showed, by the slightest murmur in the world, their conviction that the arrow had gone home, which naturally acted like a spur upon the Curate, who was not the wisest man in the world.

"I am very sorry to see you in so much distress," said the young man, looking at Mrs Els-

worthy's red eyes, "but I trust things will turn out much better than you imagine. If I can do anything to help you, let me know," said Mr Wentworth. Perhaps it was foolish to say so much, knowing what he did, but unfortunately prudence was not the ruling principle at that moment in the Curate's soul.

"I was a-thinking of letting you know, sir," said the clerk of St Roque's, with deadly meaning; "leastways not me, but them as has taken me by the hand. There's every prospect as it'll all be known afore long," said Elsworthy, pushing his wife aside and following Mr Wentworth, with a ghastly caricature of his old obsequiousness, to the door. "There's inquiries a-being made as was never known to fail. For one thing, I've written to them as knows a deal about the movements of a party as is suspected—not to say as I've got good friends," said Rosa's guardian, standing upon the step of his own door, and watching the Curate out into the darkness. Mr Wentworth could not altogether restrain a slight thrill of unpleasant emotion, for Elsworthy, standing at his door with the light gleaming over him from behind, and his face invisible, had an unpleasant resemblance to a wild beast waiting for its prey.

"I am glad to think you are likely to be so successful. Send me word as soon as you know," said the Curate, and he pursued his way home afterwards, with feelings far from pleasant. He saw something was about to come of this more than he had thought likely, and the crisis was approaching. As he walked rapidly home, he concluded within himself to have a conversation with the Rector next day after Mr Wodehouse's funeral, and to ask for an investigation into the whole matter. When he had come to this conclusion, he dismissed the subject from his mind as far as that was possible, and took to thinking of the other matters which disturbed his repose, in which, indeed, it was very easy to get perplexed and bewildered to his heart's content. Anyhow, one way and another, the day of poor Mr Wodehouse's funeral must necessarily be an exciting and momentous day.

Mr Wentworth had, however, no idea that its interest was to begin so early. When he was seated at breakfast reading his letters, a note was brought to him, which, coming in the midst of a lively chronicle of home news from his sister Letty, almost stopped for the moment the beating of the Curate's heart. It took him

so utterly by surprise, that more violent sentiments were lost for the moment in mere wonder. He read it over twice before he could make it out. It was from the Rector, and notwithstanding his wife's remonstrances, and his own qualms of doubt and uncertainty, this was what Mr Morgan said :—

“ DEAR SIR,—It is my painful duty to let you know that certain rumours have reached my ears very prejudicial to your character as a clergyman, and which I understand to be very generally current in Carlingford. Such a scandal, if not properly dealt with, is certain to have an unfavourable effect upon the popular mind, and injure the clergy in the general estimation —while it is, as I need not point out to you, quite destructive of your own usefulness. Under the circumstances, I have thought it my duty, as Rector of the parish, to take steps for investigating these reports. Of course I do not pretend to any authority over you, nor can I enforce in any way your participation in the inquiry or consent to it ; but I beg to urge upon you strongly, as a friend, the advantage of assenting freely, that your innocence (if possible) may be made apparent, and your charac-

ter cleared. I enclose the names of the gentlemen whose assistance I intend to request for this painful duty, in case you should object to any of them ; and would again urge upon you, *for your own sake*, the expediency of concurrence. I regret to say that, though I would not willingly prejudge any man, much less a brother clergyman, I do not feel that it would be seemly on my part, under the circumstances, to avail myself of your assistance to-day in the burial-service for the late Mr Wodehouse.—Believe me, very sincerely yours, W. MORGAN.”

When Mr Wentworth looked up from this letter, he caught sight of his face in the mirror opposite, and gazed into his own eyes like a man stupefied. He had not been without vexations in eight-and-twenty years of a not uneventful life, but he had never known anything like the misery of that moment. It was nearly four hours later when he walked slowly up Grange Lane to the house, which before night might own so different a master, but he had found as yet no time to spare for the Wodehouses—even for Lucy—in the thoughts which were all occupied by this unlooked-for blow. Nobody could tell, not even himself, the mental

discipline he had gone through before he emerged, rather stern, but perfectly calm, in the sunshine in front of the closed-up house. If it was not his to meet the solemn passenger at the gates with the words of hope, at least he could do a man's part to the helpless who had still to live ; but the blow was cruel, and all the force of his nature was necessary to sustain it. All Carlingford knew, by the evidence of its senses, that Mr Wentworth had been a daily visitor of the dead, and one of his most intimate friends, and nobody had doubted for a moment that to him would be assigned as great a portion of the service as his feelings permitted him to undertake. When the bystanders saw him join the procession, a thrill of surprise ran through the crowd ; but nobody—not even the man who walked beside him—ventured to trifle with the Curate's face so far as to ask why. The Grand Inquisitor himself, if such a mythical personage exists any longer, could not have invented a more delicate torture than that which the respectable and kind-hearted Rector of Carlingford inflicted calmly, without knowing it, upon the Curate of St Roque's. How was Mr Morgan to know that the sting would go to his heart ? A Perpetual Curate without a district

has nothing to do with a heart so sensitive. The Rector put on his own robes with a peaceful mind, feeling that he had done his duty, and, with Mr Leeson behind him, came to the church door with great solemnity to meet the procession. He read the words which are so sweet and so terrible with his usual reading-desk voice as he read the invitations every Sunday. He was a good man, but he was middle-aged, and not accessible to impression from the mere aspect of death ; and he did not know Mr Wodehouse, nor care much for anything in the matter, except his own virtue in excluding the Perpetual Curate from any share in the service. Such was the Rector's feeling in respect to this funeral, which made so much commotion in Carlingford. He felt that he was vindicating the purity of his profession as he threaded his way through the pathetic hillocks, where the nameless people were lying, to poor Mr Wodehouse's grave.

This, however, was not the only thing which aroused the wonder and interest of the townspeople when the two shrinking, hooded female figures, all black and unrecognisable, rose up trembling to follow their dead from the church to the grave. Everybody saw with wonder that

their place was contested, and that somebody else, a man whom no one knew, thrust himself before them, and walked alone in the chief mourner's place. As for Lucy, who, through her veil and her tears, saw nothing distinctly, this figure, which she did not know, struck her only with a vague astonishment. If she thought of it at all, she thought it a mistake, simple enough, though a little startling, and went on, doing all she could to support her sister, saying broken prayers in her heart, and far too much absorbed in the duty she was performing to think who was looking on, or to be conscious of any of the attending circumstances, except Mr Morgan's voice, which was not the voice she had expected to hear. Miss Wodehouse was a great deal more agitated than Lucy. She knew very well who it was that placed himself before her, asserting his own right without offering any help to his sisters ; and vague apprehensions, which she herself could not understand, came over her just at the moment when she required her strength most. As there were no other relations present, the place of honour next to the two ladies had been tacitly conceded to Mr Proctor and Mr Wentworth ; and it was thus that the Curate rendered the last service to his old

friend. It was a strange procession, and concentrated in itself all that was most exciting in Carlingford at the moment. Everybody observed and commented upon the strange man, who, all remarkable and unknown, with his great beard and sullen countenance, walked by himself as chief mourner. Who was he? and whispers arose and ran through the outskirts of the crowd of the most incredible description. Some said he was an illegitimate son whom Mr Wodehouse had left all his property to, but whom the ladies knew nothing of; some that it was a strange cousin, whom Lucy was to be compelled to marry or lose her share; and after a while people compared notes, and went back upon their old recollections, and began to ask each other if it was true that Tom Wodehouse died twenty years ago in the West Indies? Then behind the two ladies—poor ladies, whose fate was hanging in the balance, though they did not know it—came Mr Wentworth in his cap and gown, pale and stern as nobody ever had seen him before in Carlingford, excluded from all share in the service, which Mr Leeson, in a flutter of surplice and solemnity, was giving his valuable assistance in. The churchyard at Carlingford had not lost its semi-rural air

though the town had increased so much, for the district was very healthy, as everybody knows, and people did not die before their time, as in places less favoured. The townspeople, who knew Mr Wodehouse so well, lingered all about among the graves, looking on with neighbourly, calm regret, but the liveliest curiosity. Most of the shopkeepers at that end of George Street had closed their shops on the mournful occasion, and felt themselves repaid. As for Elsworthy, he stood with a group of supporters round him, as near as possible to the funeral procession; and farther off in the distance, under the trees, was a much more elegant spectator—an unlikely man enough to assist at such a spectacle, being no less a person than Jack Wentworth, in the perfection of an English gentleman's morning apparel, perfectly at his ease and indifferent, yet listening with close attention to all the scraps of talk that came in his way. The centre of all this wondering, curious crowd, where so many passions and emotions and schemes and purposes were in full tide, and life was beating so strong and vehement, was the harmless dead, under the heavy pall which did not veil him so entirely from the living as did the hopes and fears and curious specula-

tions which had already sprung up over him, filling up his place. Among the whole assembly there was not one heart really occupied by thoughts of him, except that of poor Lucy, who knew nothing of all the absorbing anxieties and terrors that occupied the others. She had still a moment's leisure for her natural grief. It was all she could do to keep upright and support her sister, who had burdens to bear which Lucy knew nothing of; but still, concealed under her hood and veil, seeing nothing but the grave before her, hearing nothing but the sacred words and the terrible sound of "dust to dust," the young creature stood steadfast, and gave the dead man who had loved her his due—last offering of nature and love, sweeter to anticipate than any honours. Nobody but his child offered to poor Mr Wodehouse that last right of humanity, or made his grave sacred with natural tears.

When they went back sadly out of all that blinding sunshine into the darkened house, it was not all over, as poor Lucy had supposed. She had begun to come to herself and understand once more the looks of the people about her, when the old maid, who had been the attendant of the sisters during all Lucy's life, un-

did her wrappings, and in the agitation of the moment kissed her white cheek, and held her in her arms. "Oh, Miss Lucy, darling, don't take on no more than you can help. I'm sore, sore afeared that there's a deal of trouble afore you yet," said the weeping woman. Though Lucy had not the smallest possible clue to her meaning, and was almost too much worn out to be curious, she could not help a vague thrill of alarm. "What is it, Alland?" she said, rising up from the sofa on which she had thrown herself. But Alland could do nothing but cry over her nursling and console her. "Oh, my poor dear! oh, my darling! as he never would have let the wind of heaven to blow rough upon her!" cried the old servant. And it was just then that Miss Wodehouse, who was trembling all over hysterically, came into the room.

"We have to go down-stairs," said the elder sister. "Oh Lucy, my darling, it was not my fault at first. I should have told you last night to prepare you, and I had not the heart. Mr Wentworth has told me so often——"

"Mr Wentworth?" said Lucy. She rose up, not quite knowing where she was; aware of nothing, except that some sudden calamity, under which she was expected to faint altogether,

was coming to her by means of Mr Wentworth. Her mind jumped at the only dim possibility that seemed to glimmer through the darkness. He must be married, she supposed, or about to be married ; and it was this they insulted her by thinking that she could not bear. There was not a particle of colour in her face before, but the blood rushed into it with a bitterness of shame and rage which she had never known till now. "I will go down with you if it is necessary," said Lucy; "but surely this is a strange time to talk of Mr Wentworth's affairs." There was no time to explain anything farther, for just then old Mrs Western, who was a distant cousin, knocked at the door. "God help you, my poor dear children," said the old lady; "they are all waiting for you down-stairs ;" and it was with this delusion in her mind, embittering every thought, that Lucy went into the drawing-room where they were all assembled. The madness of the idea did not strike her somehow, even when she saw the grave assembly, which it was strange to think could have been brought together to listen to any explanation from the Perpetual Curate. He was standing there prominent enough among them, with a certain air of suppressed passion

in his face, which Lucy divined almost without seeing it. For her own part, she went in with perfect firmness, supporting her sister, whose trembling was painful to see. There was no other lady in the room except old Mrs Western, who would not sit down, but hovered behind the chairs which had been placed for the sisters near the table at which Mr Waters was standing. By the side of Mr Waters was the man who had been at the funeral, and whom nobody knew, and a few gentlemen who were friends of the family were in the room—the Rector, by virtue of his office, and Mr Proctor and Dr Marjoribanks ; and any one whose attention was sufficiently disengaged to note the details of the scene might have perceived John, who had been fifteen years with Mr Wodehouse, and the old cook in her black gown, who was of older standing in the family than Alland herself, peeping in, whenever it was opened, through the door.

“ Now that the Miss Wodehouses are here, we may proceed to business,” said Mr Waters. “ Some of the party are already aware that I have an important communication to make. I am very sorry if it comes abruptly upon anybody specially interested. My late partner,

much respected though he has always been, was a man of peculiar views in many respects. Dr Marjoribanks will bear me out in what I say. I had been his partner for ten years before I found this out, highly important as it will be seen to be ; and I believe Mr Wentworth, though an intimate friend of the family, obtained the information by a kind of accident——”

The stranger muttered something in his beard which nobody could hear, and the Perpetual Curate interposed audibly. “Would it not be best to make the explanations afterwards ?” said Mr Wentworth—and he changed his own position and went over beside old Mrs Western, who was leaning upon Lucy’s chair. He put his own hand on the back of the chair with an involuntary impulse. As for Lucy, her first thrill of nervous strength had failed her : she began to get confused and bewildered ; but whatever it was, no insult, no wound to her pride or affections, was coming to her from that hand which she knew was on her chair. She leaned back a little, with a long sigh. Her imagination could not conceive anything important enough for such a solemn intimation, and her attention began to flag in spite of herself. No doubt it was something about that money which

people thought so interesting. Meanwhile Mr Waters went on steadily with what he had to say, not sparing them a word of the preamble ; and it was not till ten minutes later that Lucy started up with a sudden cry of incredulity and wonder, and repeated his last words. “ His son ! —whose son ? ” cried Lucy. She looked all round her, not knowing whom to appeal to in her sudden consternation. “ We never had a brother,” said the child of Mr Wodehouse’s old age ; “ it must be some mistake.” There was a dead pause after these words. When she looked round again, a sickening conviction came to Lucy’s heart that it was no mistake. She rose up without knowing it, and looked round upon all the people, who were watching her with various looks of pity and curiosity and spectator-interest. Mr Waters had stopped speaking, and the terrible stranger made a step forward with an air that identified him. It was at him that Mr Proctor was staring, who cleared his voice a great many times, and came forward to the middle of the room and looked as if he meant to speak ; and upon him every eye was fixed except Mr Wentworth’s, who was watching Lucy, and Miss Wodehouse’s, which were hidden in her hands. “ We never had a brother,” she

repeated, faltering ; and then, in the extremity of her wonder and excitement, Lucy turned round, without knowing it, to the man whom her heart instinctively appealed to. "Is it true ?" she said. She held out her hands to him with a kind of entreaty not to say so. Mr Wentworth made no reply to her question. He said only, "Let me take you away—it is too much for you," bending down over her, without thinking what he did, and drawing her hand through his arm. "She is not able for any more," said the Curate, hurriedly ; "afterwards we can explain to her." If he could have remembered anything about himself at the moment, it is probable that he would have denied himself the comfort of supporting Lucy—he, a man under ban ; but he was thinking only of her, as he stood facing them all with her arm drawn through his ; upon which conjunction the Rector and the late Rector looked with a grim aspect, disposed to interfere, but not knowing how.

"All this may be very interesting to you," said the stranger out of his beard ; "if Lucy don't know her brother, it is no fault of mine. Mr Waters has only said half he has got to say ; and as for the rest, to sum it up in half-a-dozen

words, I'm very glad to see you in my house, gentlemen, and I hope you will make yourselves at home. Where nobody understands, a man has to speak plain. I've been turned out all my life, and, by Jove! I don't mean to stand it any longer. The girls can have what their father's left them," said the vagabond, in his moment of triumph. "They ain't my business no more than I was theirs. The property is freehold, and Waters is aware that I'm the heir."

Saying this, Wodehouse drew a chair to the table, and sat down with emphasis. He was the only man seated in the room, and he kept his place in his sullen way amid the excited group which gathered round him. As for Miss Wodehouse, some sense of what had happened penetrated even her mind. She too rose up and wiped her tears from her face, and looked round, pale and scared, to the Curate. "I was thinking—of speaking to Lucy. I meant to ask her—to take you back, Tom," said the elder sister. "Oh, Mr Wentworth, tell me, for heaven's sake, what does it mean ?"

"If I had only been permitted to explain," said Mr Waters ; "my worthy partner died intestate—his son is his natural heir. Perhaps

we need not detain the ladies longer, now that they understand it. All the rest can be better arranged with their representative. I am very sorry to add to their sufferings to-day," said the polite lawyer, opening the door; "everything else can be made the subject of an arrangement." He held the door open with a kind of civil coercion compelling their departure. The familiar room they were in no longer belonged to the Miss Wodehouses. Lucy drew her arm out of Mr Wentworth's, and took her sister's hand.

" You will be our representative," she said to him, out of the fulness of her heart. When the door closed, the Perpetual Curate took up his position, facing them all with looks more lofty than belonged even to his Wentworth blood. They had kept him from exercising his office at his friend's grave, but nobody could take from him the still nobler duty of defending the oppressed.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHEN the door closed upon Lucy and her sister, Mr Wentworth stood by himself, facing the other people assembled. The majority of them were more surprised, more shocked than he was ; but they were huddled together in their wonder at the opposite end of the table, and had somehow a confused, half-conscious air of being on the other side.

“ It’s a very extraordinary revelation that has just been made to us,” said Dr Marjoribanks. “ I am throwing no doubt upon it, for my part ; but my conviction was, that Tom Wodehouse died in the West Indies. He was just the kind of man to die in the West Indies. If it’s you,” said the Doctor, with a growl of natural indignation, “ you have the constitution of an elephant. You should have been dead ten years ago, at the very least ; and it appears to me

there would be some difficulty in proving identity, if anybody would take up that view of the question." As he spoke, Dr Marjoribanks walked round the new-comer, looking at him with medical criticism. The Doctor's eyes shot out fiery hazel gleams as he contemplated the heavy figure. "More appearance than reality," he muttered to himself, with a kind of grim satisfaction, poising a forefinger in air, as if to probe the unwholesome flesh ; and then he went round to the other elbow of the unexpected heir. "The thing is now what you mean to do for them, to repair your father's neglect," he said, tapping peremptorily on Wodehouse's arm.

"There is something else to be said in the mean time," said Mr Wentworth. "I must know precisely how it is that a state of affairs so different from anything Mr Wodehouse could have intended has come about. The mere absence of a will does not seem to me to explain it. I should like to have Mr Brown's advice—for my own satisfaction, if nothing else."

"The parson has got nothing to do with it, that I can see," said Wodehouse, "unless he was looking for a legacy, or that sort of thing. As for the girls, I don't see what right I have to be troubled ; they took deuced little trouble with

me. Perhaps they'd have taken me in as a sort of footman without pay—you heard what they said, Waters? By Jove! I'll serve Miss Mary out for that," said the vagabond. Then he paused a little, and, looking round him, moderated his tone. "I've been badly used all my life," said the prodigal son. "They would never give me a hearing. They say I did heaps of things I never dreamt of. Mary ain't above thinking of her own interest——"

Here Mr Proctor came forward from the middle of the room, where he had been standing in a perplexed manner since the ladies went away. "Hold—hold your tongue, sir!" said the late Rector; "haven't you done enough injury already——" When he had said so much, he stopped as abruptly as he had begun, and seemed to recollect all at once that he had no title to interfere.

"By Jove!" said Wodehouse, "you don't seem to think I know what belongs to me, or who belongs to me. Hold *your* tongue, Waters; I can speak for myself. I've been long enough snubbed by everybody that had a mind. I don't mean to put up with this sort of thing any longer. Any man who pleases can consult John Brown. I recollect John Brown as well

as anybody in Carlingford. It don't matter to me what he says, or what anybody says. The girls are a parcel of girls, and I am my father's son, as it happens. I should have thought the parson had enough on his hands for one while," said the new heir, in the insolence of triumph. "He tried patronising me, but that wouldn't answer. Why, there's his brother, Jack Wentworth, his eldest brother, come down here purposely to manage matters for me. He's the eldest son, by Jove, and one of the greatest swells going. He has come down here on purpose to do the friendly thing by me. We're great friends, by Jove ! Jack Wentworth and I ; and yet here's a beggarly younger brother, that hasn't a penny——"

" Wodehouse," said Mr Wentworth, with some contempt, " sit down and be quiet. You and I have some things to talk of which had better not be discussed in public. Leave Jack Wentworth's name alone, if you are wise, and don't imagine that I am going to bear your punishment. Be silent, sir !" cried the Curate, sternly; " do you suppose I ask any explanation from you ? Mr Waters, I want to hear how this has come about ? When I saw you in this man's interest some time ago, you were not so friendly to him. Tell me how

it happens that he is now your client, and that you set him forth as the heir?"

"By Jove, the parson has nothing to do with it! Let him find it out," muttered Wodehouse in his beard; but the words were only half audible, and the vagabond's shabby soul was cowed in spite of himself. He gave the lawyer a furtive thrust in the arm as he spoke, and looked at him a little anxiously; for the position of a man standing lawfully on his natural rights was new to Wodehouse; and all his certainty of the facts did not save him from a sensation of habit which suggested that close examination was alarming, and that something might still be found out. As for Mr Waters, he looked with placid contempt at the man, who was not respectable, and still had the instincts of a vagabond in his heart.

"I am perfectly ready to explain," said the irreproachable solicitor, who was quite secure in his position. "The tone of the request, however, might be modified a little; and as I don't, any more than Mr Wodehouse, see exactly what right Mr Wentworth has to demand——"

"I ask an explanation, not on my own behalf, but for the Miss Wodehouses, who have made me their deputy," said the Curate, "for their

satisfaction, and that I may consult Mr Brown. You seem to forget that all *he* gains they lose ; which surely justifies their representative in asking how did it come about ? ”

It was at this point that all the other gentlemen present pressed closer, and evinced an intention to take part. Dr Marjoribanks was the first to speak. He took a pinch of snuff, and while he consumed it looked from under his grizzled sandy eyebrows with a perplexing mixture of doubt and respect at the Perpetual Curate. He was a man of some discrimination in his way, and the young man’s lofty looks impressed him a little in spite of himself.

“ Not to interrupt the explanation,” said Dr Marjoribanks, “ which we’ll all be glad to hear—but Mr Wentworth’s a young man not possessed, so far as I am aware, of any particular right ;—except that he has been very generous and prompt in offering his services,” said the Doctor, moved to the admission by a fiery glance from the Curate’s eye, which somehow did not look like the eye of a guilty man. “ I was thinking, an old man, and an old friend, like myself, might maybe be a better guardian for the ladies’ interests——”

Mr Proctor, who had been listening very

anxiously, was seized with a cough at this moment, which drowned the Doctor's words. It was a preparatory cough, and out of it the late Rector rushed into speech. "I have come from —from Oxford to be of use," said the new champion. "My time is entirely at my own—at Miss Wodehouse's—at the Miss Wodehouses' disposal. I am most desirous to be of use," said Mr Proctor, anxiously. And he advanced close to the table to prefer his claim.

"Such a discussion seems quite unnecessary," said Mr Wentworth, with some haughtiness. "I shall certainly do in the mean time what has been intrusted to me. At present we are simply losing time."

"But——" said the Rector. The word was not of importance, nor uttered with much resolution, but it arrested Mr Wentworth more surely than the shout of a multitude. He turned sharp round upon his adversary and said, "Well?" with an air of exasperation; while Wodehouse, who had been lounging about the room in a discomfited condition, drew near to listen.

"I am comparatively a stranger to the Miss Wodehouses," said Mr Morgan; "still I am their clergyman; and I think with Dr Marjoribanks,

that a young man like Mr Wentworth, especially a man so seriously compromised——”

“Oh, stop ! I do think you are all a great deal too hard upon Mr Wentworth,” said the lawyer, with a laugh of toleration, which Wodehouse echoed behind him with a sense of temerity that made his laughter all the louder. He was frightened, but he was glad to make himself offensive, according to his nature. Mr Wentworth stood alone, for his part, and had to put up with the laugh as he best could.

“ If any one here wishes to injure me with the Miss Wodehouses, an opportunity may easily be found,” said the Curate, with as much composure as he could muster ; “ and I am ready to relinquish my charge when they call on me to do so. In the mean time, this is not the place to investigate my conduct. Sit down, sir, and let us be free of your interference for this moment at least,” he said, fiercely, turning to the new heir. “ I warn you again, you have nothing but justice to expect at my hands. Mr Waters, we wait your explanations.” He was the tallest man in the room, which perhaps had something to do with it ; the youngest, best born, and best endowed. That he would have carried the day triumphantly in the opinion of any popular audience,

there could be no kind of doubt. Even in this middle-aged unimpressionable assembly, his indignant self-control had a certain influence. When he drew a chair towards the table and seated himself, the others sat down unawares, and the lawyer began his story without any further interruption. The explanation of all was, that Mr Wodehouse, like so many men, had an ambition to end his days as a country gentleman. He had set his heart for years on an estate in the neighbourhood of Carlingford, and had just completed his long-contemplated purchase at the moment of his last seizure. Nobody knew, except the Curate and the lawyer, what the cause of that seizure was. They exchanged looks without being aware of it, and Wodehouse, still more deeply conscious, uttered, poor wretch! a kind of gasp, which sounded like a laugh to the other horrified spectators. After all, it was his crime which had brought him his good fortune, for there had been an early will relating to property which existed no longer—property which had been altogether absorbed in the newly-acquired estate. “I have no doubt my late excellent partner would have made a settlement had the time been permitted him,” said Mr Waters. “I have not the slightest doubt as to

his intentions; but the end was very unexpected at the last. I suppose death always is unexpected when it comes," said the lawyer, with a little solemnity, recollecting that three of his auditors were clergymen. "The result is painful in many respects; but law is law, and such accidents cannot be entirely avoided. With the exception of a few trifling personal matters, and the furniture, and a little money at the bank, there is nothing but freehold property, and of course the son takes that. I can have no possible objection to your consulting Mr Brown; but Mr Brown can give you no further information." If there had been any little hope of possible redress lingering in the mind of the perplexed assembly, this brought it to a conclusion. The heir, who had been keeping behind with an impulse of natural shame, came back to the table when his rights were so clearly established. He did not know how to behave himself with a good grace, but he was disposed to be conciliatory as far as he could, especially as it began to be disagreeably apparent that the possession of his father's property might not make any particular difference in the world's opinion of himself.

"It ain't my fault, gentlemen," said Wode-

house. "Of course, I expected the governor to take care of the girls. I've been kept out of it for twenty years, and that's a long time. By Jove! I've never known what it was to be a rich man's son since I was a lad. I don't say I won't do something for the girls if they behave to me as they ought; and as for you, gentlemen, who were friends of the family, I'll always be glad to see you in my house," he said, with an attempt at a friendly smile. But nobody took any notice of the overtures of the new heir.

"Then they have nothing to depend upon," said Mr Proctor, whose agitated looks were the most inexplicable feature of the whole—"no shelter even; no near relations I ever heard of—and nobody to take care of Lucy if—" Here he stopped short and went to the window, and stood looking out in a state of great bewilderment. The late Rector was so buried in his own thoughts, whatever they might be, that he did not pay any attention to the further conversation which went on behind him—of which, however, there was very little—and only came to himself when he saw Mr Wentworth go rapidly through the garden. Mr Proctor rushed after the Perpetual Curate. He might be seriously compromised, as Mr Morgan said; but he was

more sympathetic than anybody else in Carlingford under present circumstances ; and Mr Proctor, in his middle-aged uncertainty, could not help having a certain confidence in the young man's promptitude and vigour. He made up to him out of breath when he was just entering George Street. Carlingford had paid what respect it could to Mr Wodehouse's memory ; and now the shutters were being taken off the shop windows, and people in general were very willing to reward themselves for their self-denial by taking what amusement they could out of the reports which already began to be circulated about the way in which the Miss Wodehouses were "left." When the late Rector came up with the Perpetual Curate opposite Masters's shop, there was quite a group of people there who noted the conjunction. What could it mean ? Was there going to be a compromise ? Was Carlingford to be shamefully cheated out of the "investigation," and all the details about Rosa Elsworthy, for which it hungered ? Mr Proctor put his arm through that of the Curate of St Roque's, and permitted himself to be swept along by the greater impetus of the young man's rapid steps ; for at this moment, being occupied with more important matters, the late Rector

had altogether forgotten Mr Wentworth's peculiar position, and the cloud that hung over him.

"What a very extraordinary thing!" said Mr Proctor. "What could have betrayed old Wodehouse into such a blunder? He must have known well enough. This son—this fellow—has been living all the time, of course. It is quite inexplicable to me," said the aggrieved man. "Do you know if there are any aunts or uncles—any people whom poor little Lucy might live with, for instance, if—" And here Mr Proctor once more came to a dead stop. Mr Wentworth, for his part, was so far from thinking of her as "poor little Lucy," that he was much offended by the unnecessary commiseration.

"The sisters will naturally remain together," he said; "and, of course, there are many people who would be but too glad to receive them. Miss Wodehouse is old enough to protect her sister—though, of course, the balance of character is on the other side," said the inconsiderate young man; at which Mr Proctor winced, but made no definite reply.

"So you think there are people she could go to?" said the late Rector, after a pause.

"The thing altogether is so unexpected, you know. My idea was——"

"I beg your pardon," said the Curate; "I must see Mr Brown, and this is about the best time to find him at home. Circumstances make it rather awkward for me to call at the Rectory just now," he continued, with a smile—"circumstances over which I have no control, as people say; but perhaps you will stay long enough to see me put on my trial. Good-bye now."

"Stop a moment," said Mr Proctor; "about this trial. Don't be affronted—I have nothing to do with it, you know; and Morgan means very well, though he's stupid enough. I should like to stand your friend, Wentworth; you know I would. I wish you'd yield to tell me all about it. If I were to call on you to-night after dinner—for perhaps it would put Mrs Hadwin out to give me a chop?"

The Curate laughed in spite of himself. "Fellows of All-Souls don't dine on chops," he said, unable to repress a gleam of amusement; "but come at six, and you shall have something to eat, as good as I can give you. As for telling you all about it," said Mr Wentworth, "all the world is welcome to know as much as I know."

Mr Proctor laid his hand on the young man's arm, by way of soothing him. "We'll talk it all over," he said, confidentially; "both this affair, and—and the other. We have a good deal in common, if I am not much mistaken, and I trust we shall always be good friends," said the inexplicable man. His complexion heightened considerably after he had made this speech, which conveyed nothing but amazement to the mind of the Curate; and then shook hands hastily, and hurried back again towards Grange Lane. If there had been either room or leisure in Frank Wentworth's mind for other thoughts, he might have laughed or puzzled over the palpable mystery; but as it was, he had dismissed the late Rector entirely from his mind before he reached the door of Mr Brown's room, where the lawyer was seated alone. John Brown, who was altogether a different type of man from Mr Waters, held out his hand to his visitor, and did not look at all surprised to see him. "I half expected a call from you," he said, "now that your old friend is gone, from whom you would naturally have sought advice in the circumstances. Tell me what I can do for you;" and it became apparent

to Mr Wentworth that it was his own affairs which were supposed to be the cause of his application. It may be supposed after this that the Curate stated his real object very curtly and clearly without any unnecessary words, to the unbounded amazement of the lawyer, who, being a busy man, and not a friend of the Wodehouses, had as yet heard nothing of the matter. Mr Brown, however, could only confirm what had been already said. "If it is really freehold property, and no settlement made, there cannot be any question about it," he said; "but I will see Waters to-morrow and make all sure, if you wish it; though he dares not mislead you on such a point. I am very sorry for the ladies, but I don't see what can be done for them," said Mr Brown; "and about yourself, Mr Wentworth?" Perhaps it was because of a certain look of genuine confidence and solicitude in John Brown's honest face that the Curate's heart was moved. For the first time he condescended to discuss the matter—to tell the lawyer, with whom indeed he had but a very slight acquaintance (for John Brown lived at the other end of Carlingford, and could not be said to be in society), all he knew about

Rosa Elsworthy, and something of his suspicions. Mr Brown, for his part, knew little of the Perpetual Curate in his social capacity, but he knew about Wharfside, which was more to the purpose ; and having himself been truly in love once in his life, commonplace as he looked, this honest man did not believe it possible that Lucy Wodehouse's representative could be Rosa Elsworthy's seducer—the two things looked incompatible to the straightforward vision of John Brown.

“ I'll attend at their investigation,” he said, with a smile, “ which, if you were not particularly interested, you'd find not bad fun, Mr Wentworth. These private attempts at law are generally very amusing. I'll attend and look after your interests ; but you had better see that this Tom Wodehouse,—I remember the scamp—he used to be bad enough for anything,—don't give you the slip and get out of the way. Find out if you can where he has been living these two days. I'll attend to the other matter, too,” the lawyer said, cheerfully, shaking hands with his new client ; and the Curate went away with a vague feeling that matters were about to come right somehow, at which he smiled when he came

to think of it, and saw how little foundation he had for such a hope. But his hands were full of business, and he had no time to consider his own affairs at this particular moment. It seemed to him a kind of profanity to permit Lucy to remain under the same roof with Wodehouse, even though he was her brother ; and Mr Proctor's inquiries had stimulated his own feeling. There was a certain pleasure, besides, in postponing himself and his own business, however important, to her and her concerns ; and it was with this idea that he proceeded to the house of his aunts, and was conducted to a little private sitting-room appropriated to the sole use of Miss Leonora, for whom he had asked. As he passed the door of the drawing-room, which was ajar, he glanced in, and saw his aunt Dora bending over somebody who wept, and heard a familiar voice pouring out complaints, the general sound of which was equally familiar, though he could not make out a word of the special subject. Frank was startled, notwithstanding his pre-occupations, for it was the same voice which had summoned him to Wentworth Rectory which now poured out its lamentations in the Miss Wentworths' drawing-room in Car-

lingford. Evidently some new complication had arisen in the affairs of the family. Miss Leonora was in her room, busy with the books of a Ladies' Association, of which she was treasurer. She had a letter before her from the missionary employed by the society, which was a very interesting letter, and likely to make a considerable sensation when read before the next meeting. Miss Leonora was taking the cream off this piece of correspondence, enjoying at once itself and the impression it would make. She was slightly annoyed when her nephew came in to disturb her. "The others are in the drawing-room, as usual," she said. "I can't imagine what Lewis could be thinking of, to bring you here. Louisa's coming can make no difference to you."

"So Louisa has come? I thought I heard her voice. What has happened to bring Louisa here?" said the Curate, who was not sorry to begin with an indifferent subject. Miss Leonora shook her head and took up her letter.

"She is in the drawing-room," said the strong-minded aunt. "If you have no particular business with me, Frank, you had better ask herself: of course, if you want me, I am at

your service—but otherwise I am busy, you see."

"And so am I," said Mr Wentworth, "as busy as a man can be whose character is at stake. Do you know I am to be tried to-morrow? But that is not what I came to ask you about."

"I wish you would *tell* me about it," said Miss Leonora. She got up from her writing-table and from the missionary's letter, and abandoned herself to the impulses of nature. "I have heard disagreeable rumours. I don't object to your reserve, Frank, but things seem to be getting serious. What does it mean?"

The Curate had been much braced in his inner man by his short interview with John Brown; that, and the representative position he held, had made a wonderful change in his feelings: besides, a matter which was about to become so public could not be ignored. "It means only that a good many people in Carlingford think me a villain," said Mr Wentworth: "it is not a flattering idea; and it seems to me, I must say, an illogical induction from the facts of my life. Still it is true that some people think so—and I am to be tried to-morrow. But in the mean time, something else has happened.

I know you are a good woman, aunt Leonora. We don't agree in many things, but that does not matter. There are two ladies in Carlingford who up to this day have been rich, well off, well cared for, and who have suddenly lost all their means, their protector, even their home. They have no relations that I know of. One of them is good for any exertion that may be necessary," said the Curate, his voice softening with a far-off masculine suggestion as of tears ; "but she is young—too young to contend with the world—and she is now suffering her first grief. The other is old enough, but not good for much——"

"You mean the two Miss Wodehouses ?" said Miss Leonora. "Their father has turned out to be—bankrupt ?—or something——"

"Worse than bankrupt," said the Curate : "there is a brother who takes everything. Will you stand by them—offer them shelter ?—I mean for a time. I don't know anybody I should care to apply to but you."

Miss Leonora paused and looked at her nephew. "First tell me what you have to do with them," she asked. "If there is a brother, he is their natural protector—certainly not you —unless there is something I don't know of.

Frank, you know you can't marry," said Miss Leonora, with a little vehemence, once more looking in her nephew's face.

"No," said Frank, with momentary bitterness; "I am not likely to make any mistake about that—at present, at least. The brother is a reprobate of whom they know nothing. I have no right to consider myself their protector—but I am their friend at least," said the Curate, breaking off with again that softening in his voice. "They may have a great many friends, for anything I know; but I have confidence in you, aunt Leonora: you are not perhaps particularly sympathetic," he went on with a laugh; "you don't condole with Louisa, for instance; but I could trust you with——"

"Lucy Wodehouse!" said Miss Leonora; "I don't dislike her at all, if she would not wear that ridiculous grey cloak; but young men don't take such an interest in young women without some reason for it. What are we to do for you, Frank?" said the strong-minded woman, looking at him with a little softness. Miss Leonora, perhaps, was not used to be taken into anybody's confidence. It moved her more than might have been expected from so self-possessed a woman. Perhaps no other act on

the part of her nephew could have had so much effect, had he been able to pursue his advantage, upon the still undecided fate of Skelmersdale.

“Nothing,” said the Curate. He met her eye very steadily, but she was too clear-sighted to believe that he felt as calmly as he looked. “Nothing,” he repeated again—“I told you as much before. I have been slandered here, and here I must remain. There are no parsonages or paradises for me.”

With which speech Mr Wentworth shook hands with his aunt and went away. He left Miss Leonora as he had left her on various occasions—considerably confused in her ideas. She could not enjoy any longer the cream of the missionary’s letter. When she tried to resume her reading, her attention flagged over it. After a while she put on her bonnet and went out, after a little consultation with her maid, who assisted her in the housekeeping department. The house was tolerably full at the present moment, but it was elastic. She was met at the green door of Mr Wodehouse’s garden by the new proprietor, who stared excessively, and did not know what to make of such an apparition. “Jack Wentworth’s aunt, by Jove!” he said to himself, and took off his hat, meaning

to show her “a little civility.” Miss Leonora thought him one of the attendants at the recent ceremonial, and passed him without any ceremony. She was quite intent upon her charitable mission. Mr Wentworth’s confidence was justified.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MR WENTWORTH's day had been closely occupied up to this point. He had gone through a great many emotions, and transacted a good deal of business, and he went home with the comparative ease of a man whose anxieties are relieved, not by any real deliverance, but by the soothing influence of fatigue and the sense of something accomplished. He was not in reality in a better position than when he left his house in the morning, bitterly mortified, injured, and wounded at the tenderest point. Things were very much the same as they had been, but a change had come over the feelings of the Perpetual Curate. He remembered with a smile, as he went down Grange Lane, that Mr Proctor was to dine with him, and that he had rashly undertaken to have something better than a chop. It was a very foolish engagement under

the circumstances. Mr Wentworth was cogitating within himself whether he could make an appeal to the sympathies of his aunt's cook for something worthy of the sensitive palate of a Fellow of All-Souls, when all such thoughts were suddenly driven out of his mind by the apparition of his brother Gerald—perhaps the last man in the world whom he could have expected to see in Carlingford. Gerald was coming up Grange Lane in his meditative way from Mrs Hadwin's door. To look at him was enough to reveal to any clear-sighted spectator the presence of some perpetual argument in his mind. Though he had come out to look for Frank, his eyes were continually forsaking his intention, catching at spots of lichen on the wall and clumps of herbage on the roadside. The long discussion had become so familiar to him, that even now, when his mind was made up, he could not relinquish the habit which possessed him. When he perceived Frank, he quickened his steps. They met with only such a modified expression of surprise on the part of the younger brother as was natural to a meeting of English kinsfolk. "I heard Louisa's voice in my aunt's drawing-room," said Frank; "but, oddly enough, it never occurred to me that you might have

come with her ; " and then Gerald turned with the Curate. When the ordinary family questions were asked and answered, a silence ensued between the two. As for Frank, in the multiplicity of his own cares, he had all but forgotten his brother ; and Gerald's mind, though full of anxiety, had something of the calm which might be supposed to subdue the senses of a dying man. He was on the eve of a change, which appeared to him almost as great as death ; and the knowledge of that gave him a curious stillness of composure—almost a reluctance to speak. Strangely enough, each brother at this critical moment felt it necessary to occupy himself with the affairs of the other, and to postpone the consideration of his own.

" I hope you have changed your mind a little since we last met," said Frank ; " your last letter——"

" We'll talk of that presently," said the elder brother ; " in the mean time I want to know about *you*. What is all this ? My father is in a great state of anxiety. He does not seem to have got rid of his fancy that you were somehow involved with Jack—and Jack is here," said Gerald, with a look which betokened some anxiety on his own part. " I wish you would

give me your confidence. Right or wrong, I have come to stand by you, Frank," said the Rector of Wentworth, rather mournfully. He had been waiting at Mrs Hadwin's for the last two hours. He had seen that worthy woman's discomposed looks, and felt that she did not shake her head for nothing. Jack had been the bugbear of the family for a long time past. Gerald was conscious of adding heavily at the present moment to the Squire's troubles. Charley was at Malta, in indifferent health; all the others were boys. There was only Frank to give the father a little consolation; and now Frank, it appeared, was most deeply compromised of all; no wonder Gerald was sad. And then he drew forth the anonymous letter which had startled all the Wentworths on the previous night. "This is written by somebody who hates you," said the elder brother; "but I suppose there must be some meaning in it. I wish you would be frank with me, and tell me what it is."

This appeal had brought them to Mrs Hadwin's door, which the Curate opened with his key before he answered his brother. The old lady herself was walking in the garden in a state of great agitation, with a shawl thrown

over the best cap, which she had put on in honour of the stranger. Mrs Hadwin's feelings were too much for her at that moment. Her head was nodding with the excitement of age, and injured virtue trembled in every line of her face. "Mr Wentworth, I cannot put up with it any longer; it is a thing I never was used to," she cried as soon as the Curate came within hearing. "I have shut my eyes to a great deal, but I cannot bear it any longer. If I had been a common lodging-house keeper, I could not have been treated with less respect; but to be outraged—to be insulted——"

"What is the matter, Mrs Hadwin?" said Mr Wentworth, in dismay.

"Sir," said the old lady, who was trembling with passion, "you may think it no matter to turn a house upside down as mine has been since Easter; to bring all sorts of disreputable people about—persons whom a gentlewoman in my position ought never to have heard of. I received your brother into my house," cried Mrs Hadwin, turning to Gerald, "because he was a clergyman and I knew his family, and hoped to find him one whose principles I could approve of. I have put up with a great deal, Mr Wentworth, more than I could tell to anybody. I

took in his friend when he asked me, and gave him the spare room, though it was against my judgment. I suffered a man with a beard to be seen stealing in and out of my house in the evening, as if he were afraid to be seen. You gentlemen may not think much of that, but it was a terrible thing for a lady in my position, unprotected, and not so well off as I once was. It made my house like a lodging-house, and so my friends told me; but I was so infatuated I put up with it all for Mr Frank's sake. But there *is* a limit," said the aggrieved woman. "I would not have believed it—I *could* not have believed it of you—not whatever people might say: to think of that abandoned disgraceful girl coming openly to my door——"

"Good heavens!" cried the Curate: he seized Mrs Hadwin's hand, evidently forgetting everything else she had said. "What girl?—whom do you mean? For heaven's sake compose yourself and answer me. Who was it? Rosa Elsworthy? This is a matter of life and death for me," cried the young man. "Speak quickly: when was it—where is she? For heaven's sake, Mrs Hadwin, speak——"

"Let me go, sir," cried the indignant old lady; "let me go this instant—this is insult

upon insult. I appeal to you, Mr Gerald—to think I should ever be supposed capable of encouraging such a horrid shameless——! How dare you—how dare you name such a creature to me ?” exclaimed Mrs Hadwin, with hysterical sobs. “ If it were not for your family, you should never enter my house again. Oh, thank you, Mr Gerald Wentworth—indeed I am not able to walk. I am sure I don’t want to grieve you about your brother—I tried not to believe it—I tried as long as I could not to believe it—but you hear how he speaks. Do you think, sir, I would for a moment permit such a creature to enter my door ?” she cried again, turning to Frank Wentworth as she leaned upon his brother’s arm.

“ I don’t know what kind of a creature the poor girl is,” said the Curate ; “ but I know that if you had taken her in, it would have saved me much pain and trouble. Tell me, at least, when she came, and who saw her—or if she left any message ? Perhaps Sarah will tell me,” he said, with a sigh of despair, as he saw that handmaiden hovering behind. Sarah had been a little shy of Mr Wentworth since the night Wodehouse disappeared. She had betrayed herself to the Curate, and did not like to remem-

ber the fact. Now she came up with a little toss of her head and a sense of equality, primed and ready with her reply.

"I hope I think more of myself than to take notice of any sich," said Sarah ; but her instincts were more vivid than those of her mistress, and she could not refrain from particulars. "Them as saw her now, wouldn't see much in her ; I never see such a changed creature," said Sarah ; "not as I ever thought anything of her looks ! a bit of a shawl dragged round her, and her eyes as if they would jump out of her head. Laws ! she didn't get no satisfaction here," said the housemaid, with a little triumph.

"Silence, Sarah !" said Mrs Hadwin ; "that is not a way to speak to your clergyman. I'll go in, Mr Wentworth, please—I am not equal to so much agitation. If Mr Frank will come indoors, I should be glad to have an explanation—for this sort of thing cannot go on," said the old lady. As for the Curate, he did not pay the least attention either to the disapproval or the impertinence.

"At what time did she come ?—which way did she go ?—did she leave any message ?" he repeated ; "a moment's common-sense will be of more use than all this indignation. It is of

the greatest importance to me to see Rosa Elsworthy. Here's how it is, Gerald," said the Curate, driven to his wit's end ; "a word from the girl is all I want to make an end of all this—this disgusting folly—and you see how I am thwarted. Perhaps they will answer *you*. When did she come ?—did she say anything ?" he cried, turning sharply upon Sarah, who, frightened by Mr Wentworth's look, and dismayed to see her mistress moving away, and to feel herself alone opposed to him, burst at last into an alarmed statement.

"Please, sir, it ain't no fault of mine," said Sarah ; "it was Missis as saw her. She ain't been gone not half an hour. It's all happened since your brother left. She come to the side-door ; Missis wouldn't hear nothing she had got to say, nor let her speak. Oh, Mr Wentworth, don't you go after her !" cried the girl, following him to the side-door, to which he rushed immediately. Not half an hour gone ! Mr Wentworth burst into the lane which led up to Grove Street, and where there was not a soul to be seen. He went back to Grange Lane, and inspected ever corner where she could have hid herself. Then, after a pause, he walked impetuously up the quiet road, and into Els-

worthy's shop. Mrs Elsworthy was there alone, occupying her husband's place, who had gone as usual to the railway for the evening papers. She jumped up from the high stool she was seated on when the Curate entered. "Good gracious, Mr Wentworth!" cried the frightened woman, and instinctively called the errand-boy, who was the only other individual within hearing. She was unprotected, and quite unable to defend herself if he meant anything; and it was impossible to doubt that there was meaning of the most serious and energetic kind in Mr Wentworth's face.

"Has Rosa come back?" he asked. "Is she here. Don't stare at me, but speak. Has she come back? I have just heard that she was at my house half an hour ago: have you got her safe?"

It was at this moment that Wodehouse came lounging in, with his cigar appearing in the midst of his beard, and a curious look of self-exhibition and demonstration in his general aspect. When the Curate, hearing the step, turned round upon him, he fell back for a moment, not expecting such an encounter. Then the vagabond recovered himself, and came forward with the swagger which was his only alternative.

"I thought you weren't on good terms here," said Wodehouse; "who are you asking after? It's a fine evening, and they don't seem up to much in my house. I have asked Jack Wentworth to the Blue Boar at seven—will you come? I don't want to bear any grudge. I don't know if they can cook anything fit to be eaten in my house. It wasn't me you were asking after?" The fellow came and stood close, shoulder to shoulder, by the Perpetual Curate. "By Jove, sir! I've as good a right here as you—or anywhere," he muttered, as Mr Wentworth withdrew from him. He had to say it aloud to convince himself of the fact; for it was hard, after being clandestine for half a lifetime, to move about freely in the daylight. As for Mr Wentworth, he fixed his eyes full on the new-comer's face.

"I want to know if Rosa has come home," he repeated, in the clearest tones of his clear voice. "I am told she called at Mrs Hadwin's half an hour ago. Has she come back?"

He scarcely noticed Mrs Elsworthy's answer, for, in the mean time, the cigar dropped out of Wodehouse's beard, out of his fingers. He made an involuntary step back out of the Curate's way. "By Jove!" he exclaimed to

himself—the news was more important to him than to either of the others. After a minute he turned his back upon them, and kicked the cigar which he had dropped out into the street with much blundering and unnecessary violence—but turned round and stopped short in this occupation as soon as he heard Mrs Elsworthy's voice.

"She hasn't come here," said that virtuous woman, sharply. "I've give in to Elsworthy a deal, but I never said I'd give in to take her back. She's been and disgraced us all; and she's not a drop's blood to me," said Mrs Elsworthy. "Them as has brought her to this pass had best look after her; I've washed my hands of Rosa, and all belonging to her. She knows better than to come here."

"Who's speaking of Rosa?" said Elsworthy, who just then came in with his bundle of newspapers from the railway. "I might have know'd as it was Mr Wentworth. Matters is going to be cleared, sir, between me and you. If you was going to make a proposal, I ain't revengeful; and I'm open to any arrangement as is honourable, to save things coming afore the public. I've been expecting of it. You may speak free, sir. You needn't be afraid of me."

"Fool!" said the Curate, hotly, "your niece has been seen in Carlingford ; she came to my door, I am told, about an hour ago. Give up this folly, and let us make an effort to find her. I tell you she came to my house——"

"In course, sir," said Elsworthy ; "it was the most naturalest place for her to go. Don't you stand upon it no longer, as if you could deceive folks. It will be your ruin, Mr Wentworth—you know that as well as I do. I ain't no fool, but I'm open to a honourable proposal, I am. It'll ruin you — ay, and I'll ruin you," cried Rosa's uncle, hoarsely—"if you don't change your mind afore to-morrow. It's your last chance, if you care for your character, is to-night."

Mr Wentworth did not condescend to make any answer. He followed Wodehouse, who had shuffled out after his cigar, and stopped him on the step. "I wonder if it is any use appealing to your honour," he said. "I suppose you were a gentleman once, and had the feelings of——"

"By Jove! I'm as good a gentleman as you are," cried the new heir. "I could buy you up—you and all that belongs to you, by Jove! I'm giving Jack Wentworth a dinner at the

Blue Boar to-night. I'm not a man to be cross-questioned. It appears to me you have got enough to do if you mind your own business," said Wodehouse, with a sneer. " You're in a nice mess, though you are the parson. I told Jack Wentworth so last night."

The Curate stood on the step of Elsworthy's shop with his enemy behind, and the ungrateful vagabond whom he had rescued and guarded, standing in front of him, with that sneer on his lips. It was hard to refrain from the natural impulse which prompted him to pitch the vagabond out of his way. "Look here," he said, sharply, "you have not much character to lose ; but a scamp is a different thing from a criminal. I will make the principal people in Carlingford aware what were the precise circumstances under which you came here at Easter if you do not immediately restore this unhappy girl to her friends. Do you understand me ? If it is not done at once I will make use of my information —and you know what that means. You can defy me if you please ; but in that case you had better make up your mind to the consequences ; you will have to take your place as a——"

"Stop !" cried Wodehouse, with a shiver. "We're not by ourselves—we're in the public

street. What do you mean by talking like that here? Come to my house, Wentworth—there's a good fellow—I've ordered a dinner——”

“Be silent, sir!” said the Curate. “I give you till noon to-morrow; after that I will spare you no longer. You understand what I mean. I have been too merciful already. To-morrow, if everything is not arranged to my satisfaction here——”

“It was my own name,” said Wodehouse, sullenly; “nobody can say it wasn’t my own name. You couldn’t do me any harm—you know you wouldn’t, either, for the sake of the girls; I’ll—I’ll give them a thousand pounds or so, if I find I can afford it. Come, you don’t mean that sort of thing, you know,” said the conscious criminal; “you wouldn’t do me any harm.”

“If I have to fight for my own reputation I shall not spare you,” cried the Curate. “Mind what I say! You are safe till twelve o’clock to-morrow; but after that I will have no mercy—not for your sisters’ sake, not for any inducement in the world. If you want to be known as a——”

“Oh Lord, don’t speak so loud!—what do you mean? Wentworth, I say, hist! Mr Went-

worth ! By Jove, he won't listen to me !" cried Wodehouse, in an agony. When he found that the Curate was already out of hearing, the vagabond looked round him on every side with his natural instinct of suspicion. If he had known that Mr Wentworth was thinking only of disgrace and the stern sentence of public opinion, Wodehouse could have put up with it ; but he himself, in his guilty imagination, jumped at the bar and the prison which had haunted him for long. Somehow it felt natural that such a Nemesis should come to him after the morning's triumph. He stood looking after the Curate, guilty and horror-stricken, till it occurred to him that he might be remarked ; and then he made a circuit past Elsworthy's shop window as far as the end of Prickett's Lane, where he ventured to cross over so as to get to his own house. His own house!—the wretched thrill of terror that went through him was a very sufficient offset against his momentary triumph ; and this was succeeded by a flush of rage as he thought of the Curate's other information. What was to be done ? Every moment was precious ; but he felt an instinctive horror of venturing out again in the daylight. When it approached the hour at which he had ordered

that dinner at the Blue Boar, the humbled hero wrapped himself in an old overcoat which he found in the hall, and slunk into the inn like the clandestine wretch he was. He had no confidence in himself, but he had confidence in Jack Wentworth. He might still be able to help his unlucky associate out.

When Mr Wentworth reached his rooms, he found that his guest had arrived before him, and consequently the threatened explanation with Mrs Hadwin was forestalled for that night. Mr Proctor and Gerald were sitting together, not at all knowing what to talk about ; for the late Rector was aware that Frank Wentworth's brother was on the verge of Rome, and was confused, and could not help feeling that his position between a man on the point of perversion in an ecclesiastical point of view, and another whose morals were suspected and whose character was compromised, was, to say the least, a very odd position for a clergyman of unblemished orthodoxy and respectability; besides, it was embarrassing, when he had come for a very private consultation, to find a stranger there before him. The Curate went in very full of what had just occurred. The events of the last two or three hours had worked a total change

in his feelings. He was no longer the injured, insulted, silent object of a petty but virulent persecution. The contemptuous silence with which he had treated the scandal at first, and the still more obstinate sense of wrong which latterly had shut his lips and his heart, had given way to-day to warmer and more generous emotions. What would have seemed to him in the morning only the indignant reserve of a man unjustly suspected, appeared now a foolish and unfriendly reticence. The only thing which restrained him was a still lingering inclination to screen Wodehouse, if possible, from a public exposure, which would throw shame upon his sisters as well as himself. If any generosity, if any gentlemanly feeling, were still left in the vagabond's soul, it was possible he might answer the Curate's appeal ; and Mr Wentworth felt himself bound to offer no public explanation of the facts of the case until this last chance of escape had been left for the criminal. But, so far as regarded himself, his heart was opened, his wounded pride mollified, and he was ready enough to talk of what had just happened, and to explain the whole business to his anxious companions. When he joined them, indeed, he was so full of it as almost to forget that he

himself was still believed the hero of the tale. "This unfortunate little girl has been here, and I have missed her," he said, without in the least concealing his vexation, and the excitement which his rapid walk had not subdued ; to the great horror of Mr Proctor, who tried all he could, by telegraphic glances, to recall the young man to a sense of the fact that Sarah was in the room.

"I must say I think it is imprudent—highly imprudent," said the late Rector : "they will call these women to prove that she has been here again ; and what conclusion but one can possibly be drawn from such a fact ? I am very sorry to see you so unguarded." He said this, seizing the moment after Sarah had removed the salmon, which was very good, and was served with a sauce which pleased Mr Proctor all the more that he had not expected much from an impromptu dinner furnished by a Perpetual Curate ; but the fact was, that Gerald's arrival had awakened Mrs Hadwin to a proper regard for her own credit, which was at stake.

When Sarah withdrew finally, and they were left alone, Frank Wentworth gave the fullest explanation he was able to his surprised auditors. He told them that it was Wodehouse,

and not himself, whom Rosa had met in the garden, and whom she had no doubt come to seek at this crisis of their fortunes. There was not the least doubt in his own mind that Wodehouse had carried her away, and hidden her somewhere close at hand ; and when he had given them all his reasons for thinking so, his hearers were of the same opinion ; but Mr Proctor continued very doubtful and perplexed, clear though the story was. He sat silent, brooding over the new mystery, while the brothers discussed the original questions.

"I cannot think why you did not go to the Rector at once and tell him all this," said Gerald. "It is always best to put a stop to gossip. At least you will see him to-morrow, or let me see him——"

"The Rector is deeply prejudiced against me," said the Perpetual Curate, "for a very unworthy reason, if he has any reason at all. He has never asked me to explain. I shall not interfere with his investigation," said the young man, haughtily; "let it go on. I have been working here for five years, and the Carlingford people ought to know better. As for the Rector, I will make no explanations to him."

"It is not for the Rector, it is for yourself,"

said Gerald; “and this fellow Wodehouse surely has no claim——”

But at the sound of this name, Mr Proctor roused himself from his pause of bewilderment, and took the words out of Mr Wentworth’s mouth.

“He has been here since Easter ; but why ?” said the late Rector. “I cannot fancy why Mr Wodehouse’s son should come to you when his father’s house was so near. In hiding ? why was he in hiding ? He is evidently a scamp,” said Mr Proctor, growing red ; “but that is not so unusual. I don’t understand—I am bound to say I don’t understand it. He may be the culprit, as you say ; but what was he doing here ?”

“I took him in at Miss Wodehouse’s request. I cannot explain why—*she* will tell you,” said the Curate. “As for Wodehouse, I have given him another chance till twelve o’clock to-morrow : if he does not make his appearance then——”

Mr Proctor had listened only to the first words ; he kept moving uneasily in his seat while the Curate spoke. Then he broke in, “It appears I cannot see Miss Wodehouse,” he said, with an injured tone ; “she does not see any

one. I cannot ask for any explanation ; but it seems to me most extraordinary. It is three months since Easter. If he has been living with you all the time, there must have been some occasion for it. I don't know what to think, for my part ; and yet I always imagined that I was considered a friend of the family," said the late Rector, with an aggrieved look. He took his glass of claret very slowly, looking at it as if expecting to see in the purple reflection some explanation of the mystery. As for Gerald Wentworth, he relapsed into silence when he found that his arguments did not alter Frank's decision ; he too was disappointed not to find his brother alone. He sat with his eyes cast down, and a singular look of abstraction on his face. He had got into a new atmosphere—a different world. When his anxieties about Frank were satisfied, Gerald withdrew himself altogether from the little party. He sat there, it is true, not unaware of what was going on, and even from time to time joining in the conversation ; but already a subtle change had come over Gerald. He might have been repeating an "office," or carrying on a course of private devotions, from his looks. Rome had established her dualism in his mind. He had no longer the

unity of an Englishman trained to do one thing at a time, and to do it with his might. He sat in a kind of languor, carrying on within himself a thread of thought, to which his external occupation gave no clue ; yet at the same time suffering no indication to escape him of the real condition of his mind. The three were consequently far from being good company. Mr Proctor, who was more puzzled than ever as to the true state of the case, could not unburden himself of his own intentions as he had hoped to do ; and after a while the Curate, too, was silent, finding his statements received, as he thought, but coldly. It was a great relief to him when he was called out by Sarah to speak to some one, though his absence made conversation still more difficult for the two who were left behind. Mr Proctor, from the other side of the table, regarded Gerald with a mixture of wonder and pity. He did not feel quite sure that it was not his duty to speak to him—to expound the superior catholicity of the Church of England, and call his attention to the schismatic peculiarities of the Church of Rome. “It might do him good to read Burgon’s book,” Mr Proctor said to himself ; and by way of introducing that subject, he began to talk of Italy, which was not a bad

device, and did credit to his invention. Meanwhile the Curate had gone to his study, wondering a little who could want him, and, to his utter bewilderment, found his aunt Dora, veiled, and wrapped up in a great shawl.

"Oh, Frank, my dear, don't be angry. I couldn't help coming," cried Miss Dora. "Come and sit down by me here. I slipped out and did not even put on my bonnet, that nobody might know. Oh, Frank, I don't know what to say. I am so afraid you have been wicked. I have just seen that—that girl. I saw her out of my window. Frank! don't jump up like that. I can't go on telling you if you don't stay quiet here."

"Aunt, let me understand you," cried the Curate. "You saw whom? Rosa Elsworthy? Don't drive me desperate, as all the others do with their stupidity. You saw her? when? —where?"

"Oh, Frank, Frank! to think it should put you in such a way—such a girl as that! Oh, my dear boy, if I had thought you cared so much, I never would have come to tell you. It wasn't to encourage you—it wasn't. Oh, Frank, Frank! that it should come to this!" cried Miss Dora, shrinking back from him with fright and horror in her face.

"Come, we have no time to lose," said the Curate, who was desperate. He picked up her shawl, which had fallen on the floor, and bundled her up in it in the most summary way. "Come, aunt Dora," said the impetuous young man ; "you know you were always my kindest friend. Nobody else can help me at this moment. I feel that you are going to be my deliverer. Come, aunt Dora—we must go and find her, you and I. There is not a moment to lose."

He had his arm round her, holding on her shawl. He raised her up from her chair, and supported her, looking at her as he had not done before since he was a boy at school, Miss Dora thought. She was too frightened, too excited, to cry, as she would have liked to do ; but the proposal was so terrible and unprecedented that she leaned back trembling on her nephew's arm, and could not move either to obey or to resist him. "Oh, Frank, I never went after any improper person in my life," gasped aunt Dora. "Oh, my dear, don't make me do anything that is wrong; they will say it is my fault!" cried the poor lady, gradually feeling herself obliged to stand on her feet and collect her forces. The shawl fell back from her shoulders as the Curate withdrew his arm. "You have lost my large pin,"

cried aunt Dora, in despair; “and I have no bonnet. And oh! what will Leonora say? I never, never would have come to tell you if I had thought of this. I only came to warn you, Frank. I only intended——”

“Yes,” said the Curate. The emergency was momentous, and he dared not lose patience. He found her large pin even, while she stood trembling, and stuck it into her shawl as if it had been a skewer. “You never would have come if you had not been my guardian angel,” said the deceitful young man, whose heart was beating high with anxiety and hope. “Nobody else would do for me what you are going to do—but I have always had confidence in my aunt Dora. Come, come! We have not a moment to lose.”

This was how he overcame Miss Dora’s scruples. Before she knew what had happened, she was being hurried through the clear summer night past the long garden-walls of Grange Lane. The stars were shining overhead, the leaves rustling on all sides in the soft wind—not a soul to be seen in the long line of darkling road. Miss Dora had no breath to speak, however much disposed she might have been. She could

not remonstrate, having full occasion for all her forces to keep her feet and her breath. When Mr Wentworth paused for an instant to ask "which way did she go?" it was all Miss Dora could do to indicate with her finger the dark depths of Prickett's Lane. Thither she was immediately carried as by a whirlwind. With a shawl over her head, fastened together wildly by the big pin—with nothing but little satin slippers, quite unfit for the exertion required of them—with an agonised protest in her heart that she had never, never in her life gone after any improper person before—and, crowning misfortune of all, with a horrible consciousness that she had left the garden-door open, hoping to return in a few minutes, Miss Dora Wentworth, single woman as she was, and ignorant of evil, was whirled off in pursuit of the unfortunate Rosa into the dark abysses of Prickett's Lane.

While this terrible Hegira was taking place, Mr Proctor sat opposite Gerald Wentworth, sipping his claret and talking of Italy. "Perhaps you have not read Burgon's book," said the late Rector. "There is a good deal of valuable information in it about the Catacombs,

and he enters at some length into the question between the Roman Church and our own. If you are interested in that, you should read it," said Mr Proctor; "it is a very important question."

"Yes," said Gerald; and then there followed a pause. Mr Proctor did not know what to make of the faint passing smile, the abstracted look, which he had vaguely observed all the evening; and he looked so inquiringly across the table that Gerald's new-born dualism came immediately into play, to the great amazement of his companion. Mr Wentworth talked, and talked well; but his eyes were still abstracted, his mind was still otherwise occupied; and Mr Proctor, whose own intelligence was in a state of unusual excitement, perceived the fact without being at all able to explain it. An hour passed, and both the gentlemen looked at their watches. The Curate had left them abruptly enough, with little apology; and as neither of them had much interest in the other, nor in the conversation, it was natural that the host's return should be looked for with some anxiety. When the two gentlemen had said all they could say about Italy—when Mr

Proctor had given a little sketch of his own experiences in Rome, to which his companion did not make the usual response of narrating his—the two came to a dead pause. They had now been sitting for more than two hours over that bottle of Lafitte, many thoughts having in the mean time crossed Mr Proctor's mind concerning the coffee and the Curate. Where could he have gone? and why was there not somebody in the house with sense enough to clear away the remains of dessert, and refresh the wearied interlocutors with the black and fragrant cup which cheers all students? Both of the gentlemen had become seriously uneasy by this time; the late Rector got up from the table when he could bear it no longer. "Your brother must have been called away by something important," said Mr Proctor, stiffly. "Perhaps you will kindly make my excuses. Mr Morgan keeps very regular hours, and I should not like to be late——"

"It is very extraordinary. I can't fancy what can be the reason—it must be somebody sick," said Gerald, rising too, but not looking by any means sure that Frank's absence had such a laudable excuse.

"Very likely," said the late Rector, more stiffly than ever. "You are living here, I suppose?"

"No; I am at Miss Wentworth's—my aunt's," said Gerald. "I will walk with you;" and they went out together with minds considerably excited. Both looked up and down the road when they got outside the garden-gate: both had a vague idea that the Curate might be visible somewhere in conversation with somebody disreputable; and one being his friend and the other his brother, they were almost equally disturbed about the unfortunate young man. Mr Proctor's thoughts, however, were mingled with a little offence. He had meant to be confidential and brotherly, and the occasion had been lost; and how was it possible to explain the rudeness with which Mr Wentworth had treated him? Gerald was still more seriously troubled. When Mr Proctor left him, he walked up and down Grange Lane in the quiet of the summer night, watching for his brother. Jack came home smoking his cigar, dropping Wodehouse, whom the heir of the Wentworths declined to call his friend, before he reached his aunt's

door, and as much surprised as it was possible for him to be, to find Gerald lingering, meditating, along the silent road ; but still Frank did not come. By-and-by a hurried light gleamed in the window of the summer-house, and sounds of commotion were audible in the orderly dwelling of the Miss Wentworths ; and the next thing that happened was the appearance of Miss Leonora, also with a shawl over her head, at the garden-door. Just then, when they were all going to bed, Collins, Miss Dora's maid, had come to the drawing-room in search of her mistress. She was not to be found anywhere, though her bonnets and all her outdoor gear were safe in their place. For the first time in her life the entire family were startled into anxiety on Miss Dora's account. As for Mrs Gerald Wentworth, she jumped at once to the conclusion that the poor lady was murdered, and that Frank must have something to do with it, and filled the house with lamentations. Nobody went to bed, not even aunt Cecilia, who had not been out of her room at eleven o'clock for centuries. Collins had gone into the summer-house and was turning over everything there as if she expected

to find her mistress's body in the cupboard or under the sofa ; Lewis, the butler, was hunting through the garden with a lantern, looking under all the bushes. No incident so utterly unaccountable had occurred before in Miss Dora Wentworth's life.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.







